

News

The Wilson's Difference

Greenfield's landmark family-run department store is having a birthday.

By Mark Roessler

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There's a scene in the 1947 classic holiday film *Miracle on 34th Street* in which a frustrated parent, unable to find a toy that's on her child's Christmas wish list, is astonished when Kris Kringle, Macy's Santa Claus, recommends the parent visit a competitor's store where the item is offered for less.

Kringle almost loses his job over the suggestion, but just in the nick of time a wily store manager realizes the marketing possibilities. Soon every employee is instructed to offer similar advice. Before long, the competition is doing the same. Customers are delighted. Profits soar.

As if.

These days, the notion of anything being delightful about shopping at a department store seems almost as fanciful as the notion of Santa Claus himself. Instead of stately multi-storied buildings staffed by knowledgeable, friendly people who seem genuinely glad to help, we have cavernous warehouses filled with employees who look as if having a root canal would be preferable to contending with a customer—not that they could afford such an operation on what they're paid.

For the most part, while America's department store chains have fought to slash prices and outfox the competition, in all their maneuvering and strategizing they have also lost all sense of dignity.

For the most part. Until recently I might not have hedged with such a statement, but there is a store that is an exception to this trend. It stands on the corner of Main and Davis Streets in Greenfield.

On a recent visit to Wilson's Department Store, while poking around in the toy section, I overheard a discussion between an elderly gentleman and the teenager behind the counter. After they'd searched the well-stocked shelves for a particular item without success, she did something I'd only ever seen done in the movies.

"I'm pretty sure they've got what you're looking for at Faces in Northampton," she said.

He smiled, thanked her and said, "That's why I always come here first."

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This May, Wilson's Department Store in downtown Greenfield will have been in business for 130 years.

"We're one single, independent store," said Wilson's Vice President Tamara Beauregard in a recent interview. "We're not associated with anyone else. We're family-owned, family-managed, and it's a struggle [competing] against the mammoth stores and chains. People will compare us to a Macy's or a J.C. Penney's because physically, the size of our store might compare to wherever they've shopped at the mall, but many don't realize we're not the same at all. There's a huge difference in how we operate compared to a chain. We have to try even harder."

Still in its original location, the store has grown considerably since its early days, stretching out into neighboring buildings and expanding into four floors teeming with handsomely presented merchandise. From the well dressed and regularly updated display windows out front to the stylishly adorned mannequins in the women's clothing department, there's a sense of care and artistry at work in how the store presents itself.

"Oh, you really should see the new bedroom display," the woman in the shoe department tells me when she sees my camera. "It has a Cape Cod motif. With lighthouses. It's very nicely done. Perfect for spring."

Unlike the prefabricated, cookie-cutter glitz of the displays you'll find at a chain store near you, each department has its own personality—not that of some slick marketing director working in an office building a thousand miles away, but of the lady or gentleman working quietly as customers browse.

"I firmly believe—and I tell every new employee when we're training them—that the reason we're still in business after all these years is because of our customer service," Beauregard said. "We feel this is our home while we're here, and we treat the customer as a guest."



Photo By Mark Roessler

Wilson's Department Store in downtown Greenfield

While this market-speak may have become cliché elsewhere, the longer you linger at Wilson's, the more tangible this philosophy becomes. Beside one of the entrances at the heart of the store, there are two plaques commemorating the length of service many employees have given Wilson's. There are dozens of names engraved on the one for 10-20 years of service, but even more startling are the number of names of people who have reached the "Diamond Plateau," having worked there as long as 50 years in some cases. It's concrete evidence that something special—if not unique—is at work here.

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Beauregard herself has been working at Wilson's "a little over 40 years."

"I'm one of those people who worked here during my college years, summers and weekends," she said. "When I graduated, they offered me a full-time position." She first worked in the cosmetics and candy departments, and then one summer was transferred to the business office and learned to be the switchboard operator. After years of working in advertising—a job she'd had no experience in, but Wilson's management trained her—she became the company's first female vice president.

"I don't know how else to put it," she said, "but this place is a nice place to work. Just earlier this week I was having a conversation with a colleague who's been here almost 50 years, and I was saying, 'You know, Jean, after all these years, I still like coming to work every day.' And she said, 'I know. I do, too.' I can't imagine anything worse than not liking what you're doing."

For Wilson's, being family-run is more than a question of managerial lineage.

"I raised two children working here," Beauregard said. "It's very family-oriented. Now I'm having to care for an elderly mother with health issues, so I'm on the other side of the spectrum. The company has always been very generous and very understanding when you have personal problems you have to take care of."

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It's tempting to compare a visit to the store to a trip in a time machine, but while the approach to business and customer satisfaction at Wilson's may be old-school, the inventory is current.

"Kevin O'Neil, our company president, has been very conscious about sending our buyers and managers out into the markets on a regular basis," Beauregard said. "Whether it's New York or a men's wear trade show in Las Vegas or the gift shows in Boston, we're very careful about staying up to date with our merchandise, the brands that we carry and our pricing. We've moved along. We never want to be static."

This commitment to quality merchandise has attracted shoppers from far further afield than Franklin County.

"We have a service called the Betty Brewster Personal Shopping Service that we run out of here in the advertising office," Beauregard said. "Don't ask me where Betty Brewster came from—the name's been around since long before I got here—but many of our customers assume that's the actual name of the person answering the phone. Customers call the Betty Brewster line from all over kingdom come, not just with orders, but often with questions or looking for ideas. They'll call 'Betty,' discuss what they might be looking for, and then Betty goes off and shops for them. She finds several options and then calls the person back and describes them on the phone. If they decide they want something, Betty buys it for them, gets it gift-wrapped and ships it out to them."

A customer from California regularly calls looking for sheets. Someone in Colorado has family in the Greenfield area and does all her birthday and holiday shopping through Wilson's shopping service. Another person who grew up in the area but then moved to England calls twice a year to order towels and other items.

Still, while Wilson's is known far and wide, Beauregard credits local shoppers chiefly for the store's longevity. Wilson's commitment to Greenfield and the community has been repaid for generations, and the store has become an integral part of Franklin County life.

"One thing that has changed," Beauregard said to illustrate this point, "is that we used to have a large delivery van and we used to deliver products free of charge. You could call up, order a spool of thread and it would be delivered the next day to your home. That's one thing we don't do any more—we ship via UPS. And yet that sight was so familiar—our van traveling the roads of Franklin County—that people will still say to me, even today, 'Oh, I saw the Wilson's truck last week.' But it hasn't been on the road for something like 12 years."