

Leaps of Faith: Tales of Newer Local Businesses



Mike & Dana Bell, owners of **Foot Solutions**

By John Fredericks
Photos by John Fredericks

This is the third in a series of articles we're doing on local business owners and their relatively newer businesses. From major corporations to small businesses, business owners all over the state have been downsizing, reorganizing, and out-and-out closing their doors in the last several years. And yet, as the economy in Michigan has steadily declined over those years, there are still brave souls who have taken the leap of faith to open their own businesses here. What follows are profiles of two interesting, newer businesses that are thriving despite the odds.

Foot Solutions

Mike & Dana Bell, owners

Foot Solutions, 3780 Jackson Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48103; (734) 998-3668; email: annarbor@footsolutions.com; website: www.footsolutions.com/annarbor

All too often we overuse, abuse, then neglect and ignore our feet, but Mike Bell of Foot Solutions reminds us, "The foot is the foundation of the body." When Mike and his wife, Dana, opened their business on Jackson Road (in the shopping complex in front of the Quality 16 Theatres, just west of Wagner Road), they set out on a mission to change that pattern of abuse and neglect – as well as to restore healthy feet and strong foundations to bodies all over the Ann Arbor area. Though they live in Howell, they said they were sold on opening their business in Ann Arbor, because, "The mindset here is one of better-educated people, who are more conscious of health issues and wellness."

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– Mike Bell of Foot Solutions

Yet it took a considerable leap of faith for Mike and Dana to get their business up and running. Mike had made a career in the insurance and financial planning world, but found that he liked numbers much less than working with human digits. Years earlier, in his "ski-bumming twenties," he spent time in Colorado fitting skiing professionals with custom ski boots, and he longed to return to that kind of work.

Unfortunately, the timing could not have been worse for the transition. Mike and Dana signed their lease and opened Foot Solutions in the summer of 2008, just months before the economic crash. "There was many a nail-biting moment for us after we opened," said Dana, "but somehow we made it. And we learned that our business is less dependent on economic conditions than most, probably because our market is really a unique niche that follows its own needs, rather than economic ups and downs."

Since 2008, Mike and Dana, who are board-certified pedorthists (educated in anatomy, physiology, biomechanics, and pathology), have made a science of treating the feet right. "By stabilizing the foot, we can provide an overall significant benefit to the body," says Mike. They begin with a questionnaire and a series of tests to determine one's foot health, or problems. "Through the questionnaire and talking with the individual, we want to understand the person's work, lifestyle, activities, and health," explains Mike. "Then we start with the basics of measuring the foot, both weighted (standing) and un-weighted (sitting)." He adds, "It's amazing how many people do not know their true foot size, or shoe size, in this day and age of the self-serve shoe stores."

Then they get to the high-tech part of the analysis. "We use a device that incorporates a series of sensors linked to a computer, to generate static and dynamic profiles for each foot, as well as the dynamics of the person's gait or walk," explains Dana. Mike adds, "You may have seen the 'Dr. Scholl's Machines' in stores but, compared to that, we're Superman!"

Intrigued, I asked to be a guinea pig and go through the testing. It really was amazing. After standing in a set position on the device and taking several walks across it, I got to see a detailed, three-dimensional representation of my feet mapped out on the computer screen.

After seeing the pictures and having Mike explain the numbers, I learned – thankfully – that my feet and walk are pretty normal and healthy. But the wealth of information made me ask, "How much do you charge for the diagnosis?" "The assessment we do is completely complimentary," said Mike. "The more we really know about your feet, motions, and lifestyle, the better shoe or orthotic devices we can provide you."

Dana added, "People are amazed when we sell them shoes that really fit! They go from 'It feels like there's a lot of room' or 'That's odd' to 'Wow, I can't believe how much better my feet feel!' That's because we're fitting, and sometimes actually creating, custom footwear that is specially made to conform to their feet and the tortional stresses that their feet experience."

Many people think of such service providers as just for people who have chronic foot, mobility, or back problems. Mike notes, "Indeed, if you do have a problem, many times we can tell just by watching you walk in, or looking at the assessment and saying, 'Well, you're favoring your right foot in a way that you must be having back problems in your L4-L5 (lumbar) region.' We will give you the printout from our testing, and you can give that to your doctor for further medical advice, but we're not doctors and we don't play them on TV or in the store."

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However, the proper care of the feet, and wearing shoes that are not only fitted to the feet but fitted to the tasks our feet are being asked to do, are clinically and medically proven to have health benefits. That is where Mike and Dana Bell can help everyone. "We want to understand, structurally, what are the needs of your body," says Mike. Dana adds, "And what we carry in the store is a 'fitting inventory.' If what you need isn't here, we go to the catalogues...Thirty percent of our business is special order."

The motto of Foot Solutions is "Rejuvenate Your Sole." And, one sole at a time, Mike and Dana are making great strides toward creating a healthier, happier Ann Arbor.

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Larry Bynum, Massage Therapist, Analea Leffenberry, Yoga Instructor, and Emma Greene, Massage Therapist and Co-Owner of RUB



Emma Greenand and Analea Leffenberry

Emma believes strongly that all minds and bodies are connected...[so RUB] offers a wide range of services and therapies to reconnect minds and bodies, to themselves and to “the collective.”

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RUB Ann Arbor

Emma Greene, Brandon Baugh, Diane Wyatt, and Ryan Wyatt, owners

RUB Ann Arbor, 214 S. Main Street, Suite 201, Ann Arbor 48104; (734) 213-7600; email: info@rubannarbor.com; website: www.rubannarbor.com

The first thing that hits you when you walk into RUB is an overwhelming sense of serenity. One would not necessarily expect such calm from one of the city’s newest and hottest businesses, which overlooks Ann Arbor’s busy Main Street from the second-floor space over Espresso Royale. Emma Greene, one of RUB’s four co-owners, says, “That’s what we wanted for our massage and yoga clients: a place that was quiet, serene, and inviting. And we invested a lot of hard work in the renovation of the space to make it that way.”

As they worked on that renovation, Emma recalls that she and her three partners struggled with the thoughts that they were undertaking the project at the wrong time and that it would never get off the ground. “The economy, seeing businesses close all over town, and simply having a lot of competition out there made us wonder about our sanity,” said Emma. “But we carried on tearing out walls, laying flooring, and installing ceiling tiles – if I never handle another one of those, I’ll be happy — while keeping our fingers crossed and hoping for the best.”

Despite a few signage issues, RUB opened this summer and started inviting clients into a very nice space that is making all their hard work worth it, as well as making the leap of faith pay off.

**“The economy, seeing businesses close all over town, and simply having a lot of competition out there made us wonder about our sanity.”
– Emma Greene, co-owner of RUB Ann Arbor**

RUB, an acronym for Relaxation & Ultimate Bodywork, uses their serene and tastefully under-decorated atmosphere to beckon clients to one of four private rooms and to “create their own space.” “We ask clients to feel free to bring in their own music, or whatever makes them feel more at home,” says Emma, “to make their room their own place to escape.”

With or without such personal accoutrements, clients can feel comfortable in any of their staff member’s hands. All of them have had extensive training in massage therapy, including a lot of basic anatomy and physiology study, as well as “hands-on” hours. But Emma notes, “For us, it’s really about making a mind-body connection with people.”

“For many people,” Emma continues, “massage is considered a luxury, but I try to tell people it’s a regular part of preventative care and a way to maintain true homeostasis.” She explains that she was raised in Ann Arbor and steeped in an eclectic upbringing. For instance, she believes strongly that all minds and bodies are connected.

“A lot of people today are feeling very disconnected,” Emma says. “So whether someone comes in with an acute issue, chronic pain, or just to relax — if we can make that hour better, that day better, or that week better for them, it’s an amazing thing, and I love it.”

In addition to regular massage therapy, co-partners Emma Greene, Brandon Baugh, and sister and brother Diane Wyatt and Ryan Wyatt, plus their seven additional massage therapists and three yoga instructors, offer a wide range of services and therapies to reconnect minds and bodies, to themselves and to “the collective.”

“We have several combinations of services that the other businesses in town do not have,” says Emma, “like herbal poultice massage, bamboo massage, hot Jade stone massage, prepartum/postpartum massage, deep tissue massage, and even ‘yogassage,’ where your time is split between private yoga and massage.”

In addition, RUB offers regular yoga classes, aromatherapy, and reflexology, as well as training in core strengthening and guided meditation, all at fairly reasonable prices.

“We have several combinations of services that the other businesses in town do not have,” says Emma... “[including] ‘yogassage,’ where your time is split between private yoga and massage.”

“We began with the individual,” states the RUB brochure, “and then designed therapies that would treat the entire person. Here at RUB, we call it integrated care. By fully incorporating a wide array of wellness therapies, we treat the mind, body, and soul.”

The staff delivers on that mission daily and, after checking with several clients who have experienced RUB, we can attest that it is really working.

“They have a really unique thing going on there,” said Ted, a client, after visiting RUB. “Emma is truly amazing the way she works with people and, every time I see her, I feel this remarkably deep bond that reminds me what it is to be human all over again. Her energy is unique and she really gets into your head and body in way that I can’t explain.”

Others must be starting to catch on, because we noted a steady stream of clients when we showed up twice to interview and take pictures at RUB. Regardless, clients went to their private rooms, and the serenity and peace returned to the space over Main Street all over again, as if to say, “The collective is being healed — one mind, body, and soul at a time.” Thank you, RUB.

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