

## Barbara Bradley Baekgaard / Patricia Miller



Learning experiences and strong relationships lead to achievement. Barbara Bradley Baekgaard and Patricia R. Miller, co-presidents of Vera Bradley, know this well. In 1975, Baekgaard moved to Fort Wayne from Chicago. Miller, a member the Wildwood Park welcoming committee, knocked on Baekgaard's door to welcome her to the neighborhood. Baekgaard greeted her by asking, "Do you know how to hang wallpaper?" Miller said "no" and Baekgaard said she would teach her.

From there, the two friends formed a wallpaper business.

"We called it 'Up Your Wall' and we had a good time," says Baekgaard. "We moved beyond papering and began to also sell paper."

"We were a great team," adds Miller. "Barbara liked papering around the doors and windows, and I liked the straight walls."



Through the wallpaper business, their friendship grew and they became interested in clothing. A friend of Baekgaard's came for a visit and "we loved what she was wearing," says Baekgaard. The pair learned that the clothing line had no sales representatives in Indiana, so they wasted no time in convincing the company to book a show for them on the only open weekend – Thanksgiving. The weekend turned out to be successful, and they continued to sell clothes.

A trip in 1982 opened the next door in the two friend's business experiences.

"We were coming home from Florida and, in the airport, we saw travelers carrying canvas bags," Miller says. "We thought women should have something more attractive to carry, so we came home and designed a prototype bag."

Inspired by French and English designers, the women say the design was original and created to respond to American tastes. The prototypes were created from fabric available in local fabric shops. These sample bags were then sold, along with the clothing line.

“We didn’t want our customers to know we’d made the bags because we wanted an honest reaction,” Miller says.

They had an honest reaction – women loved them! The bags became more popular than the clothing, and Barbara took a few of the samples to her daughters. Soon, all of her daughters’ friends were placing orders.

“We also wanted a name for the line that was easy, pretty and a person’s name,” Miller recalls. “Barbara’s mother’s name was the perfect fit.

“My mother’s name is Wilma Polito ... it just didn’t have that ring,” she adds with a laugh.

The women started Vera Bradley Designs, Inc. with just \$500. It has grown to become a multi-million dollar company.

“We each put in \$250, but money ran out quickly,” says Miller.

So the two women went to the bank to take out a \$2,000 loan; they took their prototype bags with them.

Baekgaard says they received their loan, but were disappointed that the banker didn’t react to their bags.

“We wanted a banker who would build a relationship with us, so we asked for a different banker,” says Miller.

Relationships proved to be an important part of the two women’s growth.

“We operate our business that way today – treating everyone as we want to be treated,” says Miller.

The women worked hard to grow their business, which was operating out of Baekgaard’s basement. They wrote to many fabric companies, trying to purchase fabric at wholesale, but had no luck.

“While visiting my daughter, who was in college in New York, I went to a large fabric company and told them who I was and that I was with Vera Bradley,” says Baekgaard. “They ushered me into the vice president’s office. He started asking questions, and it became evident that I had no idea what he was talking about.”

He then looked at her and asked, “How did you get in here?”

Baekgaard explained that the woman at the front let her in. It turned out that woman thought she was with a larger company that had a similar name. The vice president thought the situation was so funny that he decided to help Baekgaard

and let Vera Bradley buy fabric at wholesale in much smaller quantities than the minimum requirements.

“He mentored us for many years as we grew the business,” Miller says. “We operate our business that way today – treating everyone as we want to be treated.”

Baekgaard and Miller say that relationships are the essence of importance: “When a company helps you when you’re just starting out, you don’t forget them when you’re doing well.”

The Fort Wayne Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) was also an important relationship that was a vital part of Vera Bradley’s success. Baekgaard and Miller met with George Cook from SCORE.

“George was a great help, because he never told us what to do. However, he asked us questions and helped us find our own answers,” says Miller.

As the company received more orders, the women needed help sewing. The closing of International Harvester and the summer flood in 1982 put many people out of work, so when Vera Bradley placed a newspaper ad for home sewers, they were inundated with responses.

Baekgaard and Miller prepared “kits” for the home sewers and built relationships through friendship. One sewer began on her enclosed porch with these “kits” and today operates her own company that sews for Vera Bradley.

The company now provides work for more than 900 people through direct employment and subcontracting.

In the past two years, the handbag, luggage and accessories company has expanded its brand by going into licensed products. Bedding, fine rugs, pillows, lamps, dinnerware, furniture and

soon-to-be launched eyewear are among some of these licensed products.

“Licensing means more than lending the Vera Bradley name to products,” says Baekgaard. “We are involved in every detail, from design to sales, from catalogs to advertising.”

Licensing partnerships and community partnerships have added to Vera Bradley’s growth. Because Fort Wayne and Indiana have been “good to Vera Bradley, we are committed to return much to the community,” says Baekgaard.

An example of community involvement is the Habitat for Humanity house that Vera Bradley completed in November. The pair says, “It was a group effort that involved everyone in the company.”

This same dedication is shown through the Vera Bradley Foundation for Breast Cancer. Through events like the Golf and Tennis Classic, the Foundation has raised more than \$4 million for breast cancer research.

Local women’s organizations like the Fort Wayne Women’s Bureau and the YWCA, and other community organizations are also supported by Vera Bradley.

From the basement of Baekgaard’s home more than 20 years ago to a multi-million dollar company today, the women say they enjoy telling their story to inspire others: “We believe in entrepreneurship and encourage anyone to follow their dreams and their goals ... it will lead to great achievements.”