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Photo by Kenton Rowe

Perfect Fit: Sarah Calhoun, founder and owner of Red Ants Pants, kicks her boots up on a fireplace wearing her workpants "designed by women, for women."

Red Ants Pants: By Working Women, for Working Women

Fashion
show and
house party
coming to
Whitefish
March 6-7

By **DAN TESTA** of the Beacon

There are few moments one can look back on and identify as being truly pivotal, but Sarah Calhoun has no problem identifying such an instance in her own life. It was 2004, and she was sitting at Bozeman's Leaf and Bean Coffee House, reading a book titled, "Starting a Business for Dummies," and contemplating what it would be like to run her own apparel company.

In her experience working manual labor jobs, as well as her upbringing on a farm, Calhoun had always been frustrated by her pants. Heavyweight men's work pants fit poorly, particularly on the hips, while fitted women's pants weren't heavy enough for real work. An

Environmental Science major, Calhoun readily admits she didn't know the first thing about launching her own venture.

"At that point I didn't even know what a business plan was," she said. "It seemed like a good way to keep me occupied."

Noticing her book, a man at the coffee shop inquired about her idea for a business, and she told him she wanted to create a line of work clothes specifically for women. As the conversation progressed, Calhoun learned the man, Richard Siberell, had worked for 20 years on design and production for Patagonia, one of the world's leading outdoor apparel companies. After several hours of discussion, Calhoun

recalled him telling her, "Sarah, you're on to something big, I think."

It was, Calhoun said, "one of those moments when you're encouraged that you're on the right track."

Six years later, Calhoun, 30, owns and runs Red Ants Pants, a White Sulphur Springs-based business selling work pants specifically for women, as well as belts and shirts. Calhoun also sells through the Web site, *redantspants.com*, and from a 1964 Airstream trailer that tours the West.

On Saturday, March 6, Red Ants' "Tour de Pants" will pass through Whitefish, with a fashion show at the Hell Roaring Saloon, on Big Mountain, at 4 p.m. The event will allow women and men to check out the pants and try them on before buying, and though there will be ladies dancing on the bar, Calhoun assures it will be family-friendly. The following day, a house party in Whitefish, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. is planned where women can also check out the pants, as well as sample beers from Missoula's Big Sky Brewery, a tour sponsor. Those looking for more information on the Sunday party can contact Calhoun at 406-600-3986 or sarah@redantspants.com.

Looking back on her company's beginnings, Calhoun marvels at how much work it took, but feels more strongly than ever that a need exists for what Red Ants provides. In 2009, she said, sales increased 50 percent.

"Not understanding the enormity of the move is what allowed me to do it," Calhoun said. "I'm glad I am where I am but it's funny how you get here."

Following that first meeting at the coffee shop, under Siberell's guidance and with help from the Small Business Administration, Calhoun set about designing her initial product, coming up with financing, a name, logo and Web site. Eventually she settled on two styles, one for women with straighter hips and one for women with more curves.

Calhoun tested the fabrics herself,

recording how many strokes of sandpaper it took to wear out different samples. Upon selecting a fabric from India, she remembers the difficulty of developing a supply chain, and not knowing she needed a customs broker to import the fabric until getting a call from the port.

Calhoun is also grateful to the Seattle factory owners where the pants are made, a mother and daughter, who took her on as a client despite the risk of a new business and the 70 different sizes Red Ants offers. Nor is she stymied by the distance from major markets cited as a disadvantage by many Montana businesses.

"The old quote of retail being location, location, location doesn't hold up as much," Calhoun said. "I have Internet and I have U.P.S. and mail service and that's all I need."

At \$119 per pair, she believes the price is worth it for pants that will last longer than multiple pairs of other pants not made in the West by an American company.

She cites her company's location as being integral to the identity of the product.

"There's something about having a business in making work wear for women based in rural Montana that just fits," she added. "I wouldn't be anywhere else."

Red Ants doesn't sell wholesale to stores, nor does Calhoun advertise through traditional means, instead relying on social media and word-of-mouth to build a community of enthusiastic customers. Each pair of pants has an ant stitched onto it in a unique place, and when two women

find their ant in the same place, Calhoun sends them a T-shirt.

As for the name of her company, Calhoun recalls a conversation she had with a conservation biologist in California, following the brutal wildfires of 2003, where she learned

the social structure and roles of ants.

"I know that in an ant colony," she said, "it's the female ants that do all the work."

dtesta@flatheadbeacon.com



A pair of Red Ants Pants is seen with a hat and rope.