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# Work clothes

A woman builds Red Ants Pants company in an out-of-the-way place

BY KIM THIELMAN-IBES

Shooting from the hip has a whole new meaning for Sarah Calhoun, founder of the Montana-based clothing company Red Ants Pants.

Calhoun has taken out the starch, the binding front waistband, the panty-baring-oversized-backside and the dragging crotch to put the girl into the women's work pant. Thwarted not only by ill-fitting pants but also by existing manufacturer's decision to turn a blind eye towards this growing working women's niche, Calhoun did the only thing possible — she started Red Ants Pants, a manufacturer of work pants based in White Sulphur Springs.

Women who wear Red Ants Pants vary from union welders and carpenters to backyard gardeners. Calhoun's heavy-duty pants come in two basic cuts — straight and curvy — and in over 70 sizes. Her design features include a gusseted crotch — meaning you won't tear the center out climbing over the fence or jumping across a puddle. She has also contoured the waistband so the front sits below the belly and the back of the pants fit comfortable against yours. These chocolate brown pants are made of 12-ounce cotton canvas with reinforced front leg panels and seats.

Though born in New Brunswick, Canada, Calhoun grew up on a llama farm in Cornwall, Conn. Calhoun's love for the outdoors led her to a degree in environmental sciences. She spent several years working with Outward Bound as an instructor, she worked on trail crews and in various manual labor jobs including log peeling, grooming ski trails and sewing backpacks. She had little business background before starting Red Ants Pants, and most of her experience has been in the field, product testing. Her first notion to start a clothing company came one evening at Bozeman's Leaf and Bean coffee shop.

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Red Ants Pants founder Sarah Calhoun, 28, has had plenty of experience working in tough outdoor environments that demanded tough outdoor work pants.



Red Ants Pants headquarters in White Sulphur Springs.

WOMEN WHO WEAR Red Ants Pants vary from union welders and carpenters to backyard gardeners. Calhoun's heavy-duty pants come in two basic cuts — straight and curvy — and in over 70 sizes. The business is based in the small town of White Sulphur Springs, which is west of Helena and north of Livingston.

Richard Siberell, a 20-year veteran of clothing manufacturer Patagonia. Siberell gave Calhoun an earful of business advice and some industry contacts. "He was my voice of experience and is a fantastic mentor," Calhoun says. "He gave me that nudge I needed to jump in head first." Just two years later Calhoun opened the doors of Red Ants Pants in White Sulphur Springs, a small town of about 1,000 people south of Great Falls.

At first glance, White Sulphur Springs would seem to be a difficult place to start a line of clothing. But the Red Ants Pants business model is to sell directly to the consumer. Though most of her sales are over the Internet and via phone, a few of her customers actually make it into her brick store in downtown White Sulphur Springs. "I like having that connection to my customers," says Calhoun. Over the years the building has housed a saddle shop, café, laundry, post office and today it is the hub for this successful Montana start-up. Most of Red Ants Pants' marketing has been word of mouth. Fortunately for Calhoun, once one of her customers puts on her pants they are her best marketing tool. "People recognize the authenticity of the company, and a made-in-the-U.S.A. product is hard to come by any more," says Calhoun.

Her 2008 promotional push will take her, her hard-working pants and a few helpful friends on the road in what she tags as "glorified Tupperware parties," where potential new clients across the country will have a first hand chance to meet this budding entrepreneur and get their hands on these work pants.

The enthusiasm that her products have received shows she has found a market niche. "It just didn't make any sense to me that companies in this market couldn't come up with a well-designed product," Calhoun says. "It was out of necessity that I started this company." And it is her passion for making a pair of workpants that actually fit a women's body that keeps this company's products flying off the shelf.

It hasn't been all easy. Yet she had the self confidence to move her business forward. With a lot of hard work you should get there," Calhoun says. "And about those mistakes you'll make ... just don't forget to learn from them.

"Lastly, remember to laugh — it's huge."





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living

# for women

A SPECIAL SECTION OF MONTANA LIVING JUST FOR WOMEN



Whitefish personal trainer  
Sheri Lyn Foster models a pair  
of work pants from Montana  
own Red Ants Pants.

Dave Reese photo