

# White Sulphur Springs entrepreneur gets comfortable with product

## Red Ants Pants: A girl thing

By JO DEE BLACK  
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**WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS** — Sarah Calhoun didn't know anything about business when she dreamed up a company dedicated to making work wear designed for women. But she knew there was a need for the product.

A former Outward Bound staff member who also worked peeling logs and grooming ski trails, Calhoun never found functional and comfortable work pants.

"The spring of 2004, I was in California working on a trail crew doing wildfire recovery work," said Calhoun. "I was working with a lot of other women and realized I wasn't the only one with this challenge."

Women complained of awkward fitting waistlines, wear in the knees and seats and overall uncomfortable fits.

Today Calhoun's company, Red Ants Pants, is about to celebrate its second year in business. Based in 1911-era storefront in White Sulphur Springs, the company sells work pants for women, in two styles — straight and curvy — in 70 sizes.

A chance meeting in a Bozeman coffee shop deserves as much credit for bringing Red Ants Pants from the idea stage to a legitimate business, she says.

The mentor she met there, Richard Siberell, insists that what Calhoun lacks in business experience she more than makes up for in passion, work ethic and knowledge of her target market.

"She saw a gap in the market and created a truly credible product," he said. "I'd love to hire her, she'd make an incredible employee, but I wouldn't dare take her away from her company."

Siberell is a 30-year veteran of the garment industry. His experience includes with work with several small companies, as well as Patagonia

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— Red Ants Pants founder Sarah Calhoun

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clothing.

In the fall of 2004, Calhoun had moved to Bozeman with the concept of creating a women's work wear business percolating in her head. She was in a coffee shop reading a book about starting a business when she caught the attention of Siberell.

"I was there doing some work while waiting for my daughter to get out of dance class," he said.

When another customer struck up a conversation with Calhoun, Siberell overheard her plans.

"I handed her my card and told her to give me a call," he said.

A couple of weeks later, she did.

Siberell guided her through the details of the garment production process and alerted her



TRIBUNE PHOTO: STUART S. WHITE

Sarah Calhoun straightens a rack of women's work pants at Red Ants Pants, her store in White Sulphur Springs.

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about stumbling blocks. He introduced her to contacts including pattern makers, fabric suppliers and other industry insiders.

"I learned pretty quickly, this is not an easy business," Calhoun said.

The design process took almost nine months, with Calhoun going back and forth with her pattern maker in California.

Calhoun had to let go of her original intent to make a work wear product for women that cost no more than \$40.

"I found out you can't even get the

pants sewn for that," she said.

Al Deibert of the Montana Manufacturing Center assisted with setting a price. Red Ants Pants cost \$119.

"Sarah is one of those entrepreneurs who are passionate about their products and those people tend to want to give their products away," he said. "In the end, it doesn't help the business or the user because the business isn't sustainable. She is willing to take advice from people in the industry with experience, even when that advice seems counterintuitive."

Calhoun soaked up the lessons offered by industry insiders, but Red Ants Pants is strongly influenced by her personality.

The named, Red Ants Pants, "just popped in my head and I liked the ring of it," Calhoun said. She was sold after learning that in ant colonies, the females do most of work.

She picked White Sulphur Springs for her headquarters because "I missed living in the authentic side of Montana," Calhoun said.

See RED ANTS, 3B