

Kristi Mountain Sports began in 1969 in a closet at the back of the old El Sid's men's store in Alamosa. The store's founder, Jerry Peak, ASC music student, part-time ski instructor and employee of El Sid's, believed Alamosa needed a ski rental shop. Jerry moved his seasonal shop to the back of Alamosa Sporting Goods in the early 70s. A fire there forced another move—this time to 1405 Main Street.

Eric Burt's association with the store began at that location when he picked Kristi Mountain as a business to job shadow in the 8th grade. Between 8th and 9th grade, Jerry hired Eric to help remodel the store over the summer. In 1978, when Eric was a high school freshman, he started working in the shop after school and continued doing so every winter throughout high school. In summer, Eric worked for his father, John Burt, co-owner of Chaparral Tire.

In 1983, with the upcoming season's inventory already ordered, Jerry was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident. "When Jerry died," Eric said, "I was 19. I sat down with my dad and made a choice. College or this." Eric chose Kristi Mountain Sports.

One day, an Adams State student, Lisa, came to the shop to buy ski gloves. Eric and Lisa ran into each other again at a social event. Six months later, they were married. Lisa's family had developed the old Gibson's building into the Villa Mall; moving the store there made sense. In 1984, version four of Kristi Mountain Sports opened with Eric and Lisa Burt at the helm.

URGEDC: *Our introduction encapsulates the store's early history. Would you bring us up to date?*

Eric: At the first Villa Mall location, initially, it was just me and



Lisa and a part-time high school student.

We both come from families who run businesses; our families talked retail at the dinner table. We made a lot of sacrifices to make it all work. It got scary a couple of times. In 1986, when we added mountain bikes, business exploded. Later on, we added specialty outdoor products—hiking, camping and climbing—to make us into more of all-season store.

We kept adding to the store as space became available in the mall; but eventually, we reached a point where expansion was no longer possible. We did our last remodel in that store in 2000.

In 2005, San Luis Valley Federal Bank came to us and told us we needed to expand. They called us an anchor for the community. We looked at all the numbers and got things formalized. In spring 2007, when the furniture store left, we decided to move into their spot. On December 1, 2007, after major remodeling, including an addition, we opened in our current location.

Lisa: Our son Raleigh grew up in the first store at Villa Mall. We used to have a bassinet and a refrigerator in a closet. We held the baby while we waited on people. Now Raleigh is a senior in college and our youngest son, Leighton is a freshmen in high school. Both boys have worked in the store and Raleigh handles our social media.

Eric: After we got into the new store, we discovered an unintended consequence: it changed the way people shopped. The old store was so crowded customers came in, did their business and left. Now in our current location, people come in and browse for hours. We had to learn how to leave customers alone so they





could take their time to look. It's a dynamic we never saw coming. We thought we were going to have so much room in the new space, but after we got everything in there and looked around, I couldn't imagine how we had made it all fit in the other store.

URGEDC: *How many employees do you have?*

Eric: Including part-time, we have 10 employees. Lisa and I are in the store most of the time. We are 60-hour-a-week people. When we aren't in the store, our family does outdoor trips. We use the equipment we sell; we relate to it firsthand. We hire employees who enjoy the outdoors and who know what we sell. Additionally, our employees have technical training in the products we offer.

URGEDC: *What are your primary products?*

Eric: We technically are an Outdoor Retailer specializing in human and gravity-powered sports. Biking, hiking, camping, climbing, skiing and boarding is our focus. Someday we might expand into other areas.

URGEDC: *What geographic area do you serve?*

Eric: Most customers are from the Valley. However,

our customer base spills over into northern New Mexico and we have created loyalties in La Veta because there isn't another store like us to the east. While we communicate online and we have a well-developed web site, we don't offer direct online sales. There will always be someone online who will sell the same goods for less. Trying to reach that market would take time and effort away from serving the people who walk in the door.

We offer service that can't be found online. Also, people who come to the Valley from bigger markets tell us they crave the kind of attention they get here. They are tired of self-serve stores. Our most loyal customers tell us they prefer mom and pop stores like us. When our customers ask us a question, we find the answer for them. If we don't know, we pick up the phone and make the call.

URGEDC: *How do you reach your customers?*

Eric: We are unique enough in our area that we don't have to fight to get noticed on the internet or in the Yellow Pages. However, ever since we moved into the new location, we knew the storefront was a limiting factor for us. It was such a big expense to move into this spot, we held off on the expense of the new facade.

Lisa: A friend took a picture of the store with Mt. Blanca in the background and we saw that and it was a trigger. Next, the wind ripped off our facade and threw it into the parking lot, so we had to do something. We knew there was traffic passing us on the highway and people sitting at Chili's who had no idea what was here—there were even local people who didn't know we existed.

Eric: We hired local businesses to design and build the facade. Our customers tell us they are proud of the

store and the way it looks. We've become a landmark.

In addition to the new visibility the facade offers, we also rely on the internet, Facebook, newspaper, radio and local magazines. We participate in a lot of promotions and fund raisers. If we can get people to come in once, they get it. Word of mouth is our best advertisement. Also, Valley businesses support each other. We help each other out.

URGEDC: *How did you find your niche?*

Eric: We do what we love. Running the store was—and is still—a passion for us.

Lisa: We both enjoy skiing and being outdoors so we focused on the niche of human and gravity-powered sports.

Eric: Six years ago we found the weird niche of sand-boards—people go dune boarding in the National Park. It's really exploded because of social media.

URGEDC: *What advantages and challenges does the San Luis Valley offer? Describe benefits, opportunities, weaknesses and any other relevant issues.*

Eric: Real estate is more affordable here. For us, our location in the Valley is both a challenge and a disadvantage. While Alamosa is a central hub, it isn't a Durango or Gunnison. We aren't as close to the mountains. On the positive side, the mountains around us are still wild. You can't do on the Front Range what we can do here. Although Adams State University doesn't follow typical college-town demographics, that is changing. For example, ASU just added a cycling team.

Many loyal customers work at the college and hospital and often, when these institutions are recruiting, they bring candidates by our store to show, "We have this here!"

Lisa: The weather extremes of the Valley also pose a challenge. Weather and water; drought or snow. It affects everyone. When it's dry, the farmers have less disposable income. However, we are seeing that many newer generation farmers are more active outdoors year-round than their parents and grandparents were. Even in the summer, with center pivots and the ability

This business profile, was produced by the Upper Rio Grande Economic Development Council (URGEDC). This on-going series about 'Doing Business in the San Luis Valley' series offers an honest assessment of the benefits and challenges associated with owning and or operating a business in the Valley. Taken as a whole, URGEDC believes these profiles can provide insight, education, direction and inspiration to existing businesses, new businesses, community leaders and local government. Visit www.urgedc.com to learn more!

to manage them via an iPad or iPhone, this generation has more time to get outdoors.

URGEDC: *What advice would you give to someone thinking about starting or moving a business to the San Luis Valley? Are there specific opportunities or types of businesses the Valley needs and can support?*

Eric: Don't expect your business to run itself. Be prepared to work hands-on. Finding skilled workers can be a challenge. You might get 50 applicants for an opening and only find one who has the skills you need.

Lisa: That said, out of all my different job descriptions, it's been difficult figuring which ones I can delegate as the business has grown. I had to figure out which balls to juggle and what to turn over. We were so intensively hands on and as the business grew, it got so complicated, I just couldn't do it all. You have to be willing to allow someone else the chance to do the job their way.

Eric: I think we really need more homegrown Valley businesses. Big box stores and chains bring in some payroll and sales tax, but the business profits leave the Valley. The best businesses for the Valley are homegrown ones that step it up to a level that makes people say, "I want to shop here. I like the experience of meeting the staff and the owners and learning what they know." ♦

For more information on Kristi Mountain Sports, visit www.KristiMountainSports.com or call 719-589-9759.

