

Dressed 'Fur' Success

York Furrier Celebrates Nearly 80 Years



Dustin Waller/photos

By Paul Anthony Arco

Kathy Rezny, who co-owns York Furrier with husband John Rezny, knows firsthand the euphoria her clients experience when they purchase a fur coat. One year, on Sweetest Day, she was greeted in her kitchen by John, who was holding a package. Thinking it was perhaps a joke, Kathy opened the box with the York Furrier signature paper and large bow to find a stunning mink coat from their store. “I bawled like a baby,” she says. “Now I know how these women feel on Christmas Day, when they open their York Furrier gift packages. What an amazing, wonderful feeling, and I’m glad we can be a part of that.”

York Furrier has been making memories for nearly 80 years. With locations in the Elmhurst City Centre and Deer Park Town Center, it features an extensive inventory of furs, leathers, shearlings and cashmere garments, in a full range of styles and sizes, along with a mix of unique accessory items – hats, scarves and purses. In addition, to care for their clients’ own fur and fine outerwear garments, York Furrier offers a full line of professional, on-site services, including storage, cleaning, repairs and complete restyling of older garments.

The family-owned and -operated business was started by Kathy’s grandfather, Joseph R. Wagner, who arrived in New York as an 18-year-old German immigrant in 1927. Wagner worked his way across the country to Elmhurst, a small Chicago suburb with

a strong German heritage, where, in 1931, he opened his fur and tailor business on York Road.

“He was industrious, hardworking, and so very proud to have become an American citizen,” says Kathy of her grandfather, who passed away more than a decade ago at the age of 89. “Grandpa really lived the American dream. He came to this country with minimal funds and a limited proficiency of the English language, yet he started a business from scratch, volunteered to serve in World War II, operated a large mink ranch, and immersed himself in the community, through service clubs and philanthropic involvement.”

Through the decades, there have been plenty of changes in the fur industry and at York Furrier, especially with clients and their purchases. “When my grandfather owned the business, a woman was often in her late 50s before she was gifted with her first and only full-length mink coat,” Kathy says. “Now, women purchase their own wardrobe of furs, shearlings and leather at any age.”

In 2001, a year after purchasing York Furrier from second-generation owners Richard and Edith Wagner, the current owners completely remodeled the 14,000-square-foot Elmhurst store. Inspired by the chic boutiques in Milan, they selected rich cherry wood to showcase the York collection of furs and fine

outerwear, creating a more modern look with a touch of old-world craftsmanship. Then, in 2004, York opened a second, smaller location in the Deer Park Town Center. “It’s ideal for browsing,” says Kathy of the 4,000 square-foot boutique. “We opened in that location to better serve our clients from the northwest suburbs.” York Furrier also has added clientele from retiring competitors, including the Berwyn-based Javurek Furs, Maple Furrier and Abrahamson Furrier in Oak Park, and, most recently, O’Brien and Sons Fur in West Dundee.

These days, with the third generation of the family operating the business, York Furrier remains in capable hands. Kathy is responsible for public relations and marketing. Husband John, who left his family welding and fabricating business, handles the buying and sales in Elmhurst, while her brother, John Wagner, manages customer service and sales in Deer Park.

“We have a lot of energy,” Kathy says. “We’re always looking to provide our clients with the utmost in both selection and personalized service. Each year, we work out the latest in fashion and product lines; we search for innovative technologies and equipment to better service our clients’ garments; and, most importantly, we listen to our clients. We work hard to make them happy, and that makes us happy.”

The owners travel the globe to scout auction houses, showrooms and runways in such locales as Milan, Paris, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, St. Petersburg and New York, to create and assemble each year’s collection. Featuring designer creations from Michael Kors, Zandra Rhodes, Zac Posen and Dominic Bellissimo, among others, assures that York Furrier remains on the forefront of fashion.

“To complement our designer garments, we also work with our own manufacturers to create the classically inspired York Signature Styles,” Kathy says. “And, if a client prefers to create a one-of-a-kind style, then our talented on-premises craftsmen will transform the client’s vision into a custom-made York Exceptional Exclusive.”

Customers come to York Furrier from the Chicagoland area and beyond, including most Midwestern states. The store also has international customers. Clients are both men and women, and range in age from 2 to nearly 100. And, while most clients select garments for themselves, during December, both locations are packed with customers searching for the perfect gift.

After nearly eight decades in business, it’s only natural that many longtime clients have become friends, while many close friends have become loyal clients. Christina Maggio is among them. The 42-year-old public relations consultant is a second-generation customer of York Furrier. As a teenager, Maggio often tagged along whenever her mother shopped for a coat. Maggio bought her first fur 15 years ago, and now owns three of them, for different occasions.

“For me, it’s about the warmth. I get very cold,” Maggio says. “I’m the type of person who doesn’t bring out the mink just for special occasions. I will wear my furs with jeans whenever I’m shopping. They’re beautiful and elegant, and style is important,



John Wagner, of York Furrier, assists a customer.

but I’ve never had a warmer coat. I start wearing them in October and wear them through March.”

Inspired by Joseph Wagner’s philanthropic nature, the York co-owners continue to involve the business in community and charitable organizations. In addition to chamber memberships, the store participates in more than 70 runway shows and provides products for more than 200 philanthropic events each year. “Our philanthropic bent, and why we give back to the community, is definitely nurtured by my grandfather,” says Kathy, the former president of the Associated Fur Industries of Chicagoland and current Fur Information Council of America board member. “It’s important to support and give back to the community that supports you.”

Next year, York Furrier will celebrate its 80th year in business, no small feat in today’s economic climate. “I’m excited and looking forward to it,” Kathy says. “I know my grandfather would be proud, and that my parents are very pleased with how we’ve operated the business. However, this is not the time to rest on past laurels. As we look to the future, we aspire to expand operations, will continue to offer the ultimate in both product and service, and vow that providing each client with personalized attention will always be our No. 1 priority.”

Maggio appreciates York Furrier’s fur quality and excellent customer service. “The staff is fashion-forward and caters to the customer, young and old,” she says. “I can’t say enough about York Furrier. I wouldn’t go anywhere else.” ■