

John Moore spreads cheer with soft, cuddly teddy bears

BY SALLY BAIR
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STRASBURG — Teddy Bears are symbols of security, warmth and innocence, and their appeal is not limited to children. Moore Bears is an enterprise devoted to giving people of all ages all the security, love and comfort they want through stuffed bears.

Operated by Phyllis and John Moore, Moore Bears has been open only since November, but already has built a reputation for quality bears and for a caring, sunny attitude.

Hundreds of bears line the shelves and tables at the shop located at Hershey Farm Restaurant near Strasburg. In fact, visitors may be greeted by two friendly bears sitting on the front porch, and sometimes by John himself with bear in hand.

John points out, "This is a 'hands-on' shop." Touching of the merchandise is not only allowed but is encouraged; indeed, it would take tremendous self-control not to hug or squeeze the delightful bears. It also takes tremendous self-control not to take one home to love. The Moores have observed that even grumpy people become friendly once they are in the store.

But Moore Bears is not just a shop to purchase bears — the Moores will arrange for delivery of bears to shut-ins, to birthday parties, to showers, to secretaries, to bosses and for any occasion

where a gift may be appropriate. Not only does the recipient receive a stuffed, cuddly, loveable bear, but the bear is delivered by "Ted Bear," a walking, talking, 6-foot-tall bear who loves to give and get hugs.

Ted Bear is really John, but both Moores agree that once John is in the fuzzy outfit, he makes a transformation into an outgoing, funny, likeable bear who elicits reactions from people that would never come to a mere human.

In his transformation, Ted Bear will sometimes break into song, with such appropriate titles as "Let me call you Bearheart." Phyllis says with a smile, "You never know what he's going to do. I'm always a little uneasy. He is very spontaneous." Phyllis accompanies Ted Bear everywhere because he sometimes has difficulty seeing and knowing what's going on around him.

What's usually going on is the spread of happiness. If he goes to a hospital to deliver a bear, nurses, patients and others suddenly turn on cheerful smiles. Indeed, the white costume which John often wears has had its "white nose kissed in," from so much affection.

Phyllis says the first reaction of people to Ted Bear is to hug him, because of his warm and cuddly appearance. John agrees, "They always want to touch him." Only one segment of the population doesn't have that reaction, John



John Moore holds a sample of one of the many bears that keep bringing customers back to the shop he operates with wife Phyllis at Hershey Farm Restaurant near Strasburg.

points out, "From age two and under they are afraid of Ted Bear."

As John notes, there are many good reasons to send bears as gifts: flowers die, balloons break, but bears are forever. John has requests to deliver bears to people of all ages, including men. He says it's a misconception that grown men don't like teddy bears.

In fact, he has found that more older people have bears than you might imagine. Once when he delivered a bear to a very ill elderly lady in the hospital, he was called by the family to let him know that it was the first time she had smiled in months. It is experiences like these that make John teary eyed, as he says, "This is a real ministry."

John says, "They are a comfort for people to get through trying times. They can be very therapeutic to someone who's alone, or to an older person. Bears are fun." Phyllis adds that in the uncertainty of the times in which we live, "Bears stand for security."

John's background in buying teddy bears dates to when his four children were small and he became the "official teddy bear buyer" for the family. Phyllis recalls that he would go into stores and "hold and touch teddy bears and say, this is not acceptable." It was the feel of any bear that eventually sold it for John. Even with the six grandchildren, Phyllis remarks, "Nobody bought teddy bears but Grandpa."

Now most of the decisions about which bears to carry in the shop are made by Phyllis, who says, "I

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go on instinct, and what I think the public will like." She orders bears from 12 different companies and 10 individual crafts people. "I like them to feel good and I stay away from anything gaudy."

Bears in the shop range from limited edition collector items to well-known manufacturers to other "bearaphernalia." They are in all sizes, from very large to very small. Moore Bears feature specialty dressing for their bears. Some are dressed like famous athletes, some like brides and grooms, and some in nursery rhyme dress, like "Little Bear Peep." Phyllis says they will work with customers in designing an outfit if desired, but acknowledged that most people find something they want right in the shop.

The shop at Hershey Farm was an outgrowth of owners Ed and Erma Hershey asking Phyllis if she was interested in opening a quilting shop there. An avid quilter, Phyllis didn't think that was the right thing for her. "I was so busy and the things I do are expensive; they are not ordinary quilts."

However, John had suffered a heart attack last spring and had to slow down in his work at Show-Ease Stall Co., where he was sales and service manager for John Kreider. As they discussed the possibility of a bear shop with friends and family, Phyllis says they received a lot of positive feedback. Their children said, "Daddy's perfect."

Phyllis recalls, "We weren't too sure, but it was as if God had opened a door and literally pushed us through. We were here before we knew it." John agrees, "We plunged, and we enjoy it tremendously." They also credit the Hersheys for being "supportive and helpful."

One daughter helps in making the specialty clothing for the bears, and another helped run the shop until she was able to join her husband in the service. Phyllis recalls that when John had his heart attack, the children showed up at the hospital with teddy bears.

As the shop has become known and business increased, John is

working less at Show Ease and more in the store. Because of limitations on lifting because of the heart attack, this work is less stressful for him.

Phyllis continues her custom quilting by setting up her frame right in the shop. She says, "I'm so lost in teddys, I've had to give up some of my quilting work." Visitors to the shop enjoy watching her quilt and seeing progress on her projects.

Most advertising has been from word of mouth, and often customers are repeat. Despite their location in the heart of tourist country, Phyllis says they really want to build up local clientele. "Local people keep coming back, and that makes us very happy."

They have even had the experience of some out-of-state people returning to the shop. Because the inventory changes from week to week, there are always new bears to become acquainted with.

John, not surprisingly, has become a member of the Good Bears of the World, and is hoping to participate in their two-day event at the Philadelphia Zoo. The Red Rose Den meets once a month, and usually each member takes a bear and tells a bear story.

What the future holds for Moore Bears remains a question mark, because the Moores feel they are just in the process of taking off. They have not yet experienced a tourist season, and went through one holiday season with very little exposure in the community. They are enjoying each day in this business and say they will expand as necessary.

There are such things as possible franchises of the name and idea, and they would like to offer special events such as an appraisal day when customers could bring in old bears and have their true value established.

As Phyllis says, "We never knew there were so many crazy people who like bears and so many who collect bears." For the Moores and for their customers, the shop represents a fun enterprise which brings a lot of joy and happiness to the community.



"Ted Bear" delivers a bear to Dean Hershey, Manheim, after Dean was injured in a farm accident. The white, cuddly bear always attracts a lot of attention in the hospitals and invariably brings smiles to the faces of patients and staff alike.



Phyllis makes most of the buying decisions, relying on instinct and trying to figure out what customers will like. Here she works with one of the manufacturer representatives making decisions for the holiday season.