

Blue suits to blue jeans

Blakeney business owner first made her mark in Washington

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As a legislative staffer for 14 years, Paige McManus relished the fast-paced life of Washington, D.C. She drafted bills, wrote speeches and lobbied for countless causes.

Moving to south Charlotte two years ago, she no longer sells political policies. Now, she sells blue jeans.

McManus, 44, owns Denim Affair, 9848 Rea Road in The Shops at Blakeney shopping center. And as she prepares for her business's one-year anniversary on Oct. 30, she has no regrets.

"My friends who are still on the Hill during negotiations were e-mailing me complaining ... and were like, 'You don't know how lucky you are,'" she said. "And I'm like, oh yeah, I'm in the workplace listening to '80s music and I have on jeans and a strapless shirt. I totally know."

McManus, who has a bachelor's degree in social work, stocks men's and women's jeans in 15 designer labels including Lucky, AG, Denim of Virtue, Fidelity and David Kahn. Prices range from \$75 to \$224.

On Capitol Hill

During her tenure in D.C., McManus

worked for several legislators, the Republican National Committee and was the staff director of a subcommittee that monitored veterans' benefits. She spent the bulk of her final years in government handling veterans' concerns. In fact, her favorite bill to draft was also her last. Sponsored by U.S. Reps. Steve Buyer of Indiana and Mike Rogers of Michigan, the bill made protesting at a military funeral a crime. It passed in 2006.

"I loved the message we were sending," McManus said. "I loved everything about working on that bill. It was the most challenging thing, and it was the right thing to do. But those opportunities were few and far between. I wasn't learning anything. ... I was no longer challenged. The congressmen would change, but the issues (stayed the same). My life in Washington was 'Groundhog Day.' It was every day the same thing.

"Now don't get me wrong. There are days when I'm in here so bored and I'm on Facebook or Fox News. But it's easier to be bored when you're the boss," McManus said, smiling.

Setting up shop

When McManus decided to trade her six-figure job for something new and moved to Ballantyne to join family, she didn't plan to open her own business. In fact, her only

retail experience was as a shopper. But that passion is what ultimately drew her into the denim business.

McManus said she was tired of driving from store to store to find those elusive perfect jeans. She dreamed of a convenient shop with a casual atmosphere that offered her favorite designer labels, such as AG.

So she opened her own.

Crosland, the company that manages Blakeney, is leery of leasing to start-ups, especially during a harsh economic climate, said Gwen Glaeser, senior leasing associate. But during her first meeting with McManus, Glaeser knew she'd stumbled on a keeper.

Describing McManus as "bright and tenacious," Glaeser said McManus not only had a business plan in place but also had the funding to make it work. Crosland recently terminated two leases at Blakeney because the businesses couldn't get funding, Glaeser said.

As an added bonus, McManus had gotten a job at men's retailer Jos. A. Bank to learn about retail. "I've met with people who never really had that much foresight to think, 'Gosh, if I'm going to do this, I need to learn how to do this,'" Glaeser said. "I also thought, OK, she's not going to have a problem doing sales because she's been doing it her whole life (as a lobbyist)."

Now, McManus says she'll stick to "lobbying" for her denim.



Paige McManus, 44, of Ballantyne opened Denim Affair almost a year ago in the Blakeney shopping center after 14 years on Capitol Hill.

"The best part truly is that customer that comes in and says, 'I have the hardest time finding jeans to fit me.' ... I almost always can fit them, and I love it when people love their jeans so much," she said. "When they come out and they're like, 'Oh, my gosh. I love this jean. I have to own it,' you would think I was the designer of the jean. ... I just have this pride of ownership. You can't go wrong with a great pair of jeans." □