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## Family first for Urban Belly owner

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Special to Juice*



Even before Kellie Ulrich became a mom, motherhood was her business.

Struck by the lack of options for Des Moines' pregnant populace, Ulrich, 35, had the flash of genius that eventually birthed Urban Belly, a maternity and baby boutique in the East Village.

When she opened the store in September 2005, Ulrich had no idea

she'd soon join the ranks of her mom-to-be customers - minus the belly.

Six months into the store's infancy, Ulrich and her husband Matt began the process of adoption and quickly discovered exactly what it was like to look forward to the arrival of not just one baby, but two.

"When pregnancy's your business, you surprise people by choosing adoption," Ulrich said. "It's true I didn't go looking for my girls. They found me."

In the spring of 2006, Ulrich was online while at Urban Belly when she stumbled upon a photo of Guatemalan sisters Natalie and Melanie, then 4 and 1, who were awaiting adoption. Although she wasn't looking to adopt, Ulrich felt a connection that needed to be explored and contacted DeColores Adoptions International. That summer, the couple was invited to meet the girls in Guatemala.



After slogging through a rigorous adoption process that took another 10 months, the couple boarded a second plane to Guatemala. This time, the girls came back to Des Moines with them.

Throughout the return flight on May 2, 2007, the Ulrich couple sat in awe of the two girls, their tenacity and spirit, and the fact that when the plane landed in Des Moines, they'd be taking their first steps as parents.

"I remember saying to Matt, 'Can you believe we're on the way home with our kids? They have our names on their passports,'" Ulrich said.



While returning home with the girls was a challenge, Ulrich's third baby - the store - also needed her attention.

Several lower-priced designers were entering the maternity scene, prompting Ulrich to explore new sources for Urban Belly's inventory. In addition, she had a newfound interest in children's clothing and wanted to expand her stock to include threads for Des Moines' toddler set.

While Urban Belly remains focused on the preppers - selling everything from maternity undergarments and bathing suits to evening wear and jeans for pregnant women - it also houses the Urban Belly kids' section, with clothes from newborn up to size 5.

Maternity jeans, Ulrich said, are Urban Belly's bestsellers.

"It's part of the pregnancy wisdom passed between friends: If you are going to splurge on one thing during your pregnancy, make it a good pair of jeans," she said.

The store also houses adoption apparel for expecting parents, including T-shirts donning "Adoption Rocks!" and "Celebrate Adoption."

Among the surprises Ulrich received as a maternity store owner was the number of non-pregnant regulars.

"Sometimes I'm forced to take a really special top out of the window so I can save it for my pregnant shoppers," said Ulrich, who readily admits to buying many of the items in the store for her own non-maternity wardrobe.

Ulrich's customers are East Village passersby and those who drive in from around the city and state. Although she wasn't privy to the buzz around the East Village when she moved from Denver, she has been thankful for the decision ever since.

Among the benefits of owning an East Village store, Ulrich said, are the lower costs of doing business, the family-friendly hours and the camaraderie among shop owners, much of which is stimulated, she believes, by the Historic East Village, an organization established to improve the district.

Another unanticipated perk of the East Village location is the seemingly serendipitous atmosphere of her store. Call it fate, luck or chance, but many of the visitors to her store have enriched Ulrich's life in ways she never would have anticipated. Among those visitors was a woman who happened to have adopted children from Guatemala and served as an advisor and friend to the Ulrich couple throughout their adoption.

Although she dreams big founding a non-profit to benefit women in tough situations is one of her aspirations Ulrich is happiest in calm moments with her family.

"When it's me, Matt and the girls together with no obligations, it feels very natural," Ulrich said.

Likewise, she is proud of how her girls have adjusted to life in America and how they are beginning to display their generous personalities at such young ages. Natalie, now 6 and fluent in both English and Spanish, lost a tooth this summer. The dollar she found on her pillow went straight into the basket at church.

"To think I was even a small part of that is humbling," Ulrich said.