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UP FRONT

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With Sole: From left, owner Raul Ojeda and worker at Don Ville in Los Angeles.

Taking Shine to Shoemaking

Raul Ojeda went from cleaning footwear to owning high-end shop.

Raul Ojeda started his career shining shoes at the Westfield Century City shopping mall, but these days he's doing more than just getting a pair of Kenneth Coles to sparkle.

Ojeda opened a shoemaking shop last month in a 1,700-square-foot space on La Brea Avenue south of Beverly Boulevard. **Don Ville** is a workshop where craftsmen hand-make expensive footwear. It includes a retail store that sells ready-to-wear pairs.

It's an expansion play for Ojeda, who also owns shoe repair shop **Willie's Shoe Service** in Hollywood, where celebrity clients include

comedian Bill Cosby.

So how did Ojeda, 28, go from being a shoeshine man to a business owner?

"I was invited by a friend to shine shoes and at first I was a little hesitant," he said. "I was 18 and I didn't want to be known as the guy who shines shoes. But he explained to me you are working for yourself. It's a way to be able to do something productive with your life."

Ojeda left his Century City shoeshine job and started working at Willie's in 2004. That's when he learned how to repair and custom-craft shoes. He borrowed from family to buy out original owner Willebaldo Rivera in 2007 for \$150,000.

Ojeda was encouraged to open a second store by Julie Newmar — yes, Catwoman — who owns the La Brea building.

"She came to our shop, she saw what we were doing and she liked the idea," Ojeda said. "She said, 'I want this

shop in my place.'"

But Ojeda needed more than Newmar's support to open Don Ville. He couldn't get any banks to believe that a custom-made shoestore could be successful, so he raised the expansion money from friends.

Oh, and the price of his custom shoes? They start at \$1,200 for fitted models based on prototypes, and at \$2,400 for original designs.

Ojeda, who employs 12 at both of his shops, acknowledges that most people don't have \$2,400 to drop on shoes. But there are people who can't find what they need among department store offerings.

"It's an item needed for someone who has such a difficult time finding shoes because they have a narrow heel, superhigh arch," Ojeda said. "I'm selling a concept for shoes and hoping that people will get the idea of having higher-quality items, whether it's footwear or clothing."

—Alexa Hyland

Getting Emotional Online

SendLove lets website visitors rate celebs, athletes and politicians.

The Facebook generation knows how to like something. If you watch a funny YouTube video, you only have to hit the "like" button to show your approval.

Now, downtown L.A. startup **SendLove**.to wants to teach social networkers a wider range of emotions.

"In a world of likes and fan buttons, the social web has painted an overly optimistic picture of everything," said SendLove co-founder Chris Lyman. "You have to have the dissenting opinion in order to have a realistic perspective."

Lyman and co-founder Corey Brundage launched SendLove on Aug. 9 as a way to gather opinions about public figures such as politicians, athletes and celebrities written about in blog posts or online news articles. Lyman's previous startup



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All Heart: From left, SendLove's Corey Brundage and Chris Lyman at the firm's downtown L.A. office.

was **Fonality**, a telecommunications firm in Plano, Texas, which he left last year.

When a blog or website signs up for SendLove, readers can vote for or against any person mentioned on the site by clicking on an emotion heart — <3 — or sad face — :(— next to a name in an article. At the bottom of the article, SendLove shows the person's total rating from votes across its network along with readers' comments.

SendLove web pages display rankings for about 2 million public figures and reader comments. For example, President Obama has a 71 percent rating, far above his recent 40 percent approval rating nationally in the Gallup Poll.

SendLove is now a free service, financed by a \$500,000

funding round. The seven-person company has about 150 sites signed up, including political blog **TheModerate**.com.

It is not making money now, but could in the future by selling ads or selling the polling information it gathers, among other possibilities. The company also could charge people to use it, but Lyman said he wouldn't do that until SendLove's audience grows.

Lyman started with the idea of rating people only, because he thought that would elicit the most responses. But he would consider expanding to companies and brands.

"I decided public figures were probably the safest bet to start with," he said. "It's much easier to say if you like or don't like a celebrity or athlete."

—Natalie Jarvey

Commercial Break?

Son of movie director wins ad contests while waiting for film gig.

Alex Rydell's commercials are selling pizzas, lighters and printers. But he's unemployed. Oh, and he's the son of a Hollywood director.

"I wish I had a T-shirt that said, 'Nepotism Failed Me,'" said the 25-year-old.

Rydell, whose father, Mark, is famous for "The Rose" and "On Golden Pond," decided he wanted to try directing commercials while waiting to break into the movie game. So he signed up on **PopTent.net**, an Orange

County web site where new filmmakers compete for business from major advertisers.

Each commercial is a contest. The advertiser posts the goal for a future TV spot and offers a cash prize; then aspiring filmmakers submit their self-produced commercials. A typical project receives between 20 and 200 submissions. The contest ends when the advertiser picks a winner, who takes home a prize from \$500 to \$10,000. Rydell, who works out of his home office in Mar Vista, submitted three commercials and won every time.

His Pizza Hut ad has aired on nationally broadcast programs. His spot for Zippo lighters is scheduled to appear in Asia. And his ad for Brother printers is posted on the company's website.

Rydell spent between \$600 and \$1,200 for each ad, not including deferred salary for his crew. So far he has won \$22,500 in prize money.

Is that thanks to dad's influence? He acknowledged he has learned from watching his father work as a director.

"Success doesn't necessarily translate to the next generation," he said. "My father didn't help me on a practical level with these commercials."

And it hasn't been easy.

"Every time I do a PopTent commercial, I'm out about \$1,000 dollars," he said. "It's a risky game. I would like to get hired to do a commercial rather than just enter contests. Employment is the next step but it has yet to happen."

—Joel Russell

Coming Back Into Fashion

As president of the California Fashion Association, **Ilse Metchek** doesn't go many places without dressing to the nines. So it was something of



Metchek

a shock recently when she went with her daughter on safari in the African wilds, worlds away from Rodeo Drive.

"There were no designer jeans, no Gucci bags and no jewelry," Metchek said. "You don't realize until you get out of everyday life that what we think of as necessary

to our lives is totally irrelevant when you get out of this milieu."

She spent a little time investigating South African fashion, but the two-week trip was mostly for pleasure, she said. It was an eye-opening

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experience, driving by prides of lions, flying in four-seater planes and eating water buffalo.

But while she cherishes the experience, Metchek admitted that it didn't take long to acclimate back into the L.A. scene.

"I immediately put on my makeup and jewelry and high heels," she said. "Immediately."

View Finder

Talk about a career change.

Fredric Roberts traded boardrooms for remote villages in India and Myanmar more than a decade ago, and he has never looked back.

The Brentwood businessman, who founded L.A. investment banking firm F.M. Roberts & Co. and who served as chairman of the National



Roberts

Association of Securities Dealers when it owned and operated Nasdaq, began taking pictures of people living in developing countries after retiring from the corporate world in 2000.

"I'm much happier sitting in a tribal village in a mountain in (Myanmar) or with remote tribes in India," said Roberts, who spends about a month living with his subjects so they become comfortable with him and his camera.

Roberts, 69, now has more than 30 exhibits

under his belt and three books, the most recent of which, "Humanitas III: The People of Burma," is set to go on sale this month.

His interest in photography grew after several magazine editors saw pictures he took during a vacation to Thailand, China and Tibet, and encouraged him to make a career from behind the lens.

Roberts has plenty of once-in-a-lifetime stories, thanks to his second profession.

"I've had near-death experiences," he said. "I shot pictures of the Dalai Lama at Varanasi in India. And when the speech was over, all these Tibetans and Tibetan monks came like a torrent pouring out of a tent where he was speaking and I thought I was going to be trampled to death."

Staff reporters **Richard Clough** and **Alexa Hyland** contributed to this column. Page 3 is compiled by Editor **Charles Crumpley**. He can be reached at ccrumpley@labusinessjournal.com.