

shopping

Running Start

At Two Rivers Treads in Shepherdstown, customers leave with much more than a new pair of running shoes.

It seems a little contradictory at first—a shoe store for people who advocate going barefoot? When you walk into Two Rivers Treads in Shepherdstown, the first thing you notice is, well, shoes. Everywhere. They're even dangling from the ceiling, old pairs of shoes that have clearly seen some use. It might seem like some sort of statement against shoes at first, but it's actually representative of the philosophy behind the store's popularity. Each pair of shoes suspended above your head has seen more than 1,000 miles of action. Behind each pair is someone who benefited from natural running, someone who found a home in the community that has developed due to the store's detail-oriented, personable approach.

It all started when Dr. Mark Cucuzzella received some terrible news. An avid competitive and recreational runner, Mark was diagnosed with severe arthritis in his feet and toes in 2000. He was told to stop running. At first he complied, but Mark missed his daily runs. "It wasn't even the physical effects I missed as much as the mental effects," he says. "Running is like a form of meditation. It cleared my mind."

So Mark began to do some research. Eventually his digging led him to East African running techniques and he learned their approach was considerably different from what he was used to. They almost seemed propelled into motion, with shorter, springy strides and straight posture, leaning slightly forward from the ankles. Instead of running into the ground, they glided over it.

There was only one problem. This form was nearly impossible to attain in a traditional running shoe—you know, the kind



"It's simple," says Paul Koczera, a longtime Two Rivers Treads employee. "We want customers to find a shoe they

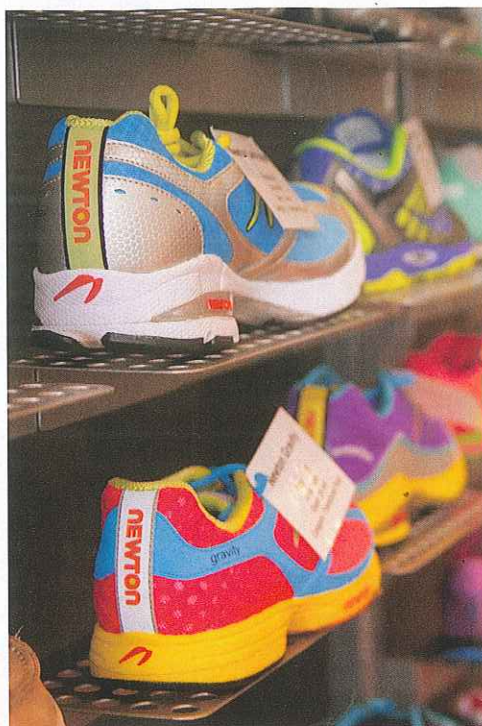
love the fit of during the running cycle." Customers may test shoes on the store's treadmill or with a short run outside.

with lots of cushioning and an elevated heel. All that extra stuff, designed to protect the runner's feet from injury, was altering Mark's ability to adopt a safer, more efficient, natural running form. That was when he became interested in running flats. "There wasn't any real market for them, and there wasn't a lot of research. It became my own experiment," he says. "I slowed down, applied the principles of easy movement, and it worked. My last running injury was in 2000."

Inspired by his discovery, Mark opened the doors to his natural running store in 2010. At the time, it was one of the only stores in the country that exclusively sold shoes that were flat to the ground. It might seem odd that a small town in West Virginia, one of the most obese states in the country, would be home to some of the newest information about running techniques. Instead, it's a reason for its success. "It was a social experiment. People thought that if we put flat shoes on them, they would get hurt. But we put the shoes on them and taught them how to wear them and they didn't get hurt," Mark says. "And believe me, I live in a small town. Everyone here knows me. If my shoes hurt them, they would let me know."

Two Rivers' success doesn't stem as much from the products sold as it does from the effects of those products. The selection is great, undeniably. The store has three levels of running shoes—transitional, minimal, and ultra-minimal—not to mention minimalist dress shoes and casual shoes. You can buy the proper socks and toe separators. You can even snag a GPS watch for long runs. You can get all the tools you need for a healthy, active lifestyle.

But what's really special is that when you come into the store, the staff makes sure you know what you need and why. They test the strength and function in your feet and your metabolic fitness to find the right shoes for your personal transition into natural running. Paul Koczera, who has been working at the store for almost three years, says the first step in working with people who are new to natural running is speaking the same language. It's a joke, but there's truth to it. "If I am speaking about advanced running biome-



chanics to someone who has no prior knowledge or exposure to running techniques, then I am wasting their time and mine," he says. "It is critical for us to share knowledge that will connect with the person wherever he or she is presently as a runner."

The experience doesn't stop when you find a pair of shoes you love. The folks at Two Rivers Treads realize transitioning is a process, not an event. They offer clinics and hands-on assessments to further tailor your transition to healthier running. With such a great resource available, running is becoming

a popular pastime in the area. "We're starting to host races. There's a run almost every weekend. People are getting into the activity," says Mark. "They've embraced that we are doing something different. Shepherdstown is different. There was already an interest in living healthy and living local. It was a fit."

TWO RIVERS TREADS

107 West German Street, Shepherdstown, WV 25443
304.876.1100, tworivertreads.com

written by **MIRIAH HAMRICK**

photographed by **ELIZABETH ROTH**