

Karen McKibbin

President of Nordstrom Canada

By Sara Samson • Photography by Colin Way

All eyes will be on Nordstrom as it opens its first Canadian—and first international—store in Calgary’s Chinook Centre this month.

At the helm of this big move is the president of Nordstrom Canada, Karen McKibbin.

The seasoned traveller, expert shopper and businesswoman is unfazed; with more than 25 years at Nordstrom, McKibbin is ready to take on the challenge.

“I’ve been really fortunate to have a great career at the same company for most of my working life,” she says.

McKibbin started at Nordstrom as a stock person, right out of university, with a plan to work for a few years before going to graduate school. Instead, she rose through the ranks as a buyer, store manager and regional manager for five different districts in the United States including Northern California, Hawaii, the South (Florida, Georgia and Texas), New England and the Northwest.

“It’s been a lot of fun to work for Nordstrom,” she says, “because I’ve had this wide variety of roles and continue to really grow in the company.”

She credits her varied background for preparing her to lead the way into Canada.

Her work has allowed her to call Los Angeles, Miami and, most recently, Seattle home.

McKibbin says there are things she misses about all the cities she has lived in, but is an especially huge fan of Southern California.

“It’s a place that I go at least two or three times a year because I love the food culture, and the weather can’t be beat,” she says. “And there’s a few [hotel] properties there I love—there’s Shutter in Santa Monica and Casa Del Mar; they are both right on the beach but really close to downtown Santa Monica.”

One of the things that McKibbin says draws her to a hotel or restaurant when travelling is

the authenticity of the staff that works there—a feeling that the staff truly enjoy serving customers and aren’t putting on an act.

“I spend my professional career serving customers,” she says. “So it’s nice when I’m the customer to feel the same level of service and authenticity.”

Providing exceptional customer service—to Canadians—is definitely on McKibbin’s mind these days. Nordstrom already has Canadian shoppers; they cross the border or they shop online. In fact, McKibbin says, Canada is Nordstrom’s top country for international shipping.

The strong Canadian economy is a major draw for American retailers. “Canada’s unemployment is lower than many countries,” McKibbin says. “And the demographics are right in terms of spend[ing] and in terms of income.”

McKibbin says Canadian stores will be very similar to Nordstrom stores in the United States.

“In terms of products, we heard that loud and clear from our customers,” she says of the Nordstrom product lines that will include Rebecca Minkoff and Kate Spade New York. “They are wanting Nordstrom to come to Canada because they love the products that we carry.”

How Canadian shoppers will respond to Nordstrom remains to be seen, but McKibbin’s own passion for the company is clear. Nordstrom might even be her calling.

“I think a calling is something that you have a true honest-to-goodness passion and enthusiasm for doing,” she says, adding that the best career advice she was ever given is the importance of finding a calling rather than a job.

After 25-plus years with the company, McKibbin has clearly heeded that advice.

“Life is too short to work at something you don’t love.”

“It’s been a lot of fun to work for Nordstrom, because I’ve had this wide variety of roles and continue to really grow in the company.”

Nordstrom openings across Canada

Friday, September 19, 2014: Chinook Centre, Calgary.

Friday, March 6, 2015: Rideau Centre, Ottawa.

Fall 2015: Pacific Centre, Vancouver.

Fall 2016: Toronto Eaton Centre, Toronto.

Fall 2016: Yorkdale Centre, Toronto.

Spring 2017: Sherway Gardens, Toronto.