

off the lip

# 'Born of need'

MARTIN KEEN, 45 | Designer

He doesn't approach design with the fashion runway in mind. Martin Keen designs based on need — he created a strappy sandal with tennis-shoe toe protection to avoid stubbing his toes while sailing. The U.K. native's father worked for Clarks of England, but Keen never anticipated he would follow in his father's footsteps. But after the "Jamestown" prototype, named after his beloved hometown, received such promising feedback, Keen decided to launch Keen Footwear. Rooted in his philosophy of function over fashion, Keen Footwear sold \$1.5 million its first season and was awarded "2003 Launch of the Year" by Footwear News — the trade's leading magazine. The company steadily grew and is currently selling a wide variety of shoe styles across the globe. But last April, Keen sold his share in the company to his partner, co-owner Rory Fuerst. After 20 years in an industry, the Ohio State University alumnus never intended to be a part of, Keen is taking on a new challenge — unique, functional furniture design. **BY BRE EATON**

## How'd you come up with the design for the first Keen shoe, the Jamestown?

I'm a competitive sailor. In 1999, I came up with an idea based on a need that I had sailing in sandals. I kept hitting my toes on cleats and hinges. When tacking, you're trying to watch the wind, the competition, the waves. You're not watching where you are going on the boat, so very often you end up stubbing your toes. Everyone has those moments when you're wearing sandals. It was one of those simple moments of insight that led to me building a prototype. Then I wore this pair of sandals around Newport, Jamestown, sailing. I'd wear it just to kind of get people's reactions to the look because they were definitely odd looking. Some people say they're so ugly they're beautiful! (*Smiles.*) But they got a very positive reaction because they were different looking. And they appeared to be very functional — something people haven't tried before.

## What led you to take a chance and start your own footwear company?

I lost a few contracts after Sept. 11, 2001, when companies started really tightening their wallets. I also have to credit the feeling that everyone had after 9/11 — what are we all here for? What is our purpose in life? I continued to work for these companies, giving my ideas away, selling my ideas instead of having ownership of them. So I decided to try to pursue launching a company.

## How'd you do it?

After finding my partner, Rory Fuerst, we launched the brand in February 2003 at an outdoor winter trade show in Salt Lake City. I built the booth for the trade show in my backyard here in Jamestown and shot and laid out the entire catalog with a friend. Very low budget, really, my friends and family were the models.

This sort of hybrid shoe-sandal, multi-functional product was an instant success. It was absolutely amazing! The crazy thing is we launched a sandal company at a winter trade show where people were looking for parkas and boots. But within that first season, we did \$1.5 million in sales, which was well beyond what I thought we would do. A year later, we did 10 times that. And since then, let's see, last year we did 100 times that — over \$150 million in sales. And still it's been very steady growth.

## You cast a bunch of people's feet to create such a comfy sole. How did you go about asking people if you could cast their feet?

Being in an industry where I traveled to Asia and Europe a lot, I met a lot of people and had a lot of friends worldwide. I'd take the opportunity to ask if I could cast their feet, (*laughs*) you know, like you do in casual conversation! So I ended up having a library of all these foot shapes and I sort of blended them into an ergonomic, proper foot shape. It doesn't look as stylish, but I didn't care about it being stylish or sexy. I wanted it to just function.

## Has that always been your style?

I was the kid at the bus stop (*laughs*) that always wore the rain jacket when it was raining, instead of being cool and just holding it. But then I'd get to school and take off my rain jacket, and then I was the smart one. Do what works, not necessarily what looks great.

## Did you ever get pushback about not manufacturing in America?

Well, (*subtle laugh*) I was very idealistic in the beginning by attempting to make it here. I went to a rubber manufacturer in North Brookfield, Mass., a stitching house in Fall River, and I found a place that would assemble it in Maine. When I put it all

together, I think I would've had to retail these ugly sandals for \$250! So it just didn't compute. There was no way to do it.

## The beautifully ugly sandals wouldn't have sold.

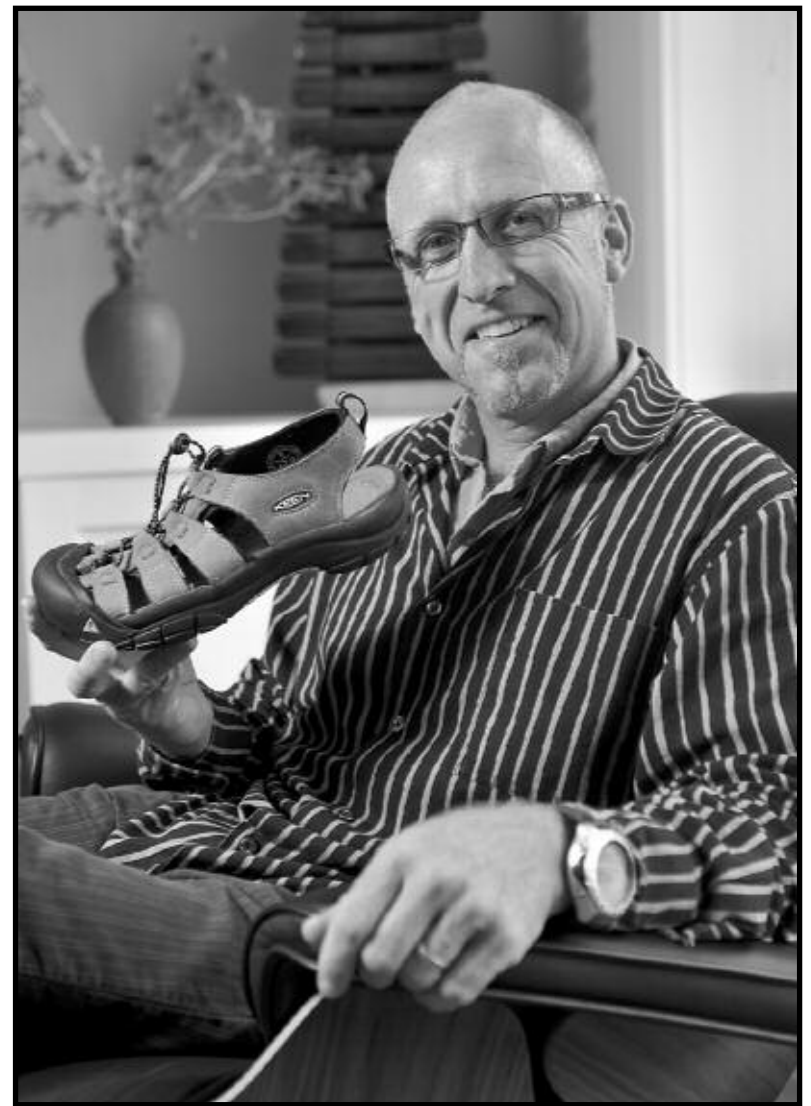
It wouldn't have been a success. That being said, there are different grades of factories in China. I always make sure they are top grade as far as human rights, working conditions, the environment.

## Have you ever stopped conducting business with a factory because of human rights issues?

I remember one of my first trips to Taiwan when I first got into the industry. There was a pregnant 16-year-old girl working on a shoe assembly line, responsible for putting glue on the sole. But this was basically a contact cement, which is quite a hazardous glue to be breathing. She had no mask and there was no ventilation. At that point, early on in my career, I realized I didn't want to be a part of the problem. So every time I went to a factory, especially when I started my own brand, I met with factory owners, and we walked the entire factory floor. This way I could personally point out what some of the issues were. I'd feel guilt if I'm going to have my name on something and it's injuring somebody. We're providing jobs and that's great, but if at the same time these people are exposing themselves to things that are hazardous, I don't want to be a part of it.

## When did you start sailing?

I think I was 4 years old on my first sailing experience, and it was out on the Irish Sea. My father built a little wooden boat. I remember setting off a beach. We had a black lab who'd want to get in the boat with us. It was a tiny little boat and the dog was just too big. We would go out and the dog would swim after us. For miles! Even-



**Feet first.** Jamestown resident Martin Keen, shown with the iconic 'Newport' shoe he designed, is known for creating a multi-functional, hybrid shoe-sandal that prioritized function over fashion. He is now taking the same approach to furniture. PHOTO BY DAVE HANSEN

tually (*laughs*) my father would feel sorry for him and pull him into the boat. I don't know why I fell in love with sailing with that sort of experience — a cold, wet dog!

## This past April you sold your share in Keen Footwear to your partner, co-owner Rory Fuerst. Why? And, what are you doing now?

The timing was right. Having been in the shoe business for 20 years, I feel like it's time to do something outside of footwear, because like I said (*laughs*), I thought I'd never go into the shoe business. So I'm pursuing some interest I have in furniture design and designing some very unique furniture concepts. I hope to launch a brand at some point in the future.

## Can you give us a sneak peak? What unique design can we anticipate?

You'll have to wait to find out more

details about the furniture concept. But I'll give you a little teaser: The furniture concept, like the Keen shoe brand, was "born of need." Advances in personal technology have changed the way we work today and the task seating and desks we use have not evolved at the same pace. What I am working towards is not just a new piece of furniture, it's a new way of working, freeing you to be a more efficient and more creative multi-tasker.

## Any advice for entrepreneurs?

I think a lot of people have great ideas. It's simply a matter of trusting yourself, that you may be an expert at something, that you may have a very good idea and that idea has worth. We can be our own worst critic and never get anywhere because we fear failure. Our minds will continuously harp on the impossibilities and seemingly insurmountable odds. Trust yourself and go for it.