

Ahead of her time

Sylvia Leibner, the founder of Linen Chest, demonstrated how necessity is the mother of invention when she opened her first housewares store over 50 years ago. Two of her sons have taken her vision and turned it into a thriving retail chain that *Home Style* has selected as this year's recipient of the Global Innovator Award (*gia*) for merchandising excellence.

By Denise Gaze

During a time when family life was dominated by the traditional roles for mother and father, with fathers normally being the breadwinners in the family, and mothers responsible for the household and children, Sylvia Leibner was not your typical housewife. It was the early '60s, but she was already thinking outside the proverbial homemaker box.

While in search of exemplary products for her home and not finding them, she decided she would open her own store, one that would offer both quality and selection at guaranteed lowest prices. Little did she know at the time that she was building a Canadian retail legacy.

Obviously not afraid of hard work, or a challenge, Leibner opened her first

Linen Chest store in 1961 in a tiny 250-square foot space on Queen Mary Street in Montreal. Leibner, a Russian immigrant who came to Canada with her parents was "a pioneer" according to her son Stan Leibner, who is now Linen Chest's president and runs the company along with his brother Sheldon.

How could Sylvia Leibner ever imagine that the little store she started 52





years ago would go on to win the Consumers Choice Award for 20 years running, and in 2013 become *Home Style Magazine's* recipient of the Global Innovator Award for Canada, now competing to be selected as one of the best merchandisers in the world at the housewares show in Chicago.

The heart of this story, however, starts with a busy mother of five sons who understood that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. (The first Linen Chest store that Sylvia Leibner opened expanded six times.)

Leibner chose the name Linen Chest based on a bride's trousseau. A traditional trousseau was stored in a hope chest and included various items, such as clothing and linens, that a bride saved for her marriage. In fact, the original logo for the store featured just such a chest.

At the time, Linen Chest offered consumers in Quebec one of the largest selections of bedding, bathware and housewares available. The chain has since expanded into New Brunswick



The new Leaside store in Toronto is part of a historic train depot that was preserved and renovated to house Linen Chest and a Longos store.

and Ontario and continues to raise the bar higher for itself each year.

"Today, Linen Chest is recognized for its "approach, wide assortment and service. Major statements are in bedding, bath, kitchen, tabletop dining, gift, wellness, decor, accent furniture and mattresses," says Gino Andreoli, Linen Chest's product planning and analysis manager. "All stores also have Shop at Home and Bridal presentations as well as an interactive Web kiosk."

Andreoli's role includes acting as a link between the stores, distribution, management and overseeing the buying group, and seeking new opportunities. To date there are 22 stores with a 23rd store ready to open by the time the Chicago show opens in March of this year.

Buyers scour vendor showrooms, visit national and international trade shows and listen to feedback from customers in order to find the latest trends.

"We are constantly developing and seeking new product to meet the needs of our customers. We act as home decor consultants by bringing in new decor accessories, beautiful fabrics, the latest fashion and the coolest kitchen tools throughout the year." says Andreoli.

In its home province of Quebec Linen Chest proudly boasts 15 – soon to be 16 – stores, including a stunning 30,000-square-foot store at the Rockland Centre in Montreal.

Home Style recently visited the new Leaside Village store in Toronto. The layout of the merchandise and the bright, beautiful store encompasses 13,000 square feet, housed in a historic, renovated train station. As with all stores, creative merchandising is key at the Leaside store. Walking in the front entrance the customer is greeted with a modern circular coffee bar featuring a huge range of coffeemakers and high end espresso machines. Each of these expensive machines is displayed out of the box to create a tactile experience. On either side of the coffee bar, there is range of small kitchen appliances and barware displayed on clean white shelving, with wide aisles leading into elaborate bedding displays beyond.

Large "touch me" screens are located throughout the



Above: The late Sylvia Leibner surrounded by her five sons in the early 1980s. On her immediate right are Stanley and Sheldon Leibner, shown left in a more recent photo. Below: The Linen Chest buying team, left to right, Gino Andreoli, Tori Schofield, Kathleen Rutt and Catherine Faisans.





store, so consumers don't have to wander around aimlessly. This modern technology will direct the consumer straight to the product they are searching for. Cooking and product demonstrations are held regularly.

Utilizing social media such as Facebook, Linen Chest still sends out a monthly flyer with an average of 16 pages of products. While customers can shop for all they need online, Linen Chest will send qualified representatives directly to the consumer's home to measure a window for a window treatment at no extra charge. Linen Chest continues to demonstrate that the customer comes first at all times.

No doubt Sylvia Leibner would be proud to see such a contemporary, cutting edge store considering her original humble shop.

It's interesting to note that, although it was 1961, Sylvia had the full support of her husband when she started her business.

"My dad was in the textile business, and she would run things by him" according to Stan Leibner. "He was very supportive of her. My mom believed in hard work, passion, commitment and perseverance."

Today Stan gives full credit for the chain's success to his team at Linen Chest, which he oversees along with Sheldon the company's CEO. "It's really a big team effort. Most of the employees have been here a very long time and we are one big happy family. We have tremendous team morale."

As Linen Chest's buyer for tabletop and gift, Tori Schofield has been with the company for six years. She has to keep her finger on the pulse of what the trends are and what consumers want. "Right now white is big," she says. "Everyone wants white dinnerware because it is the best platform for food presentation. But that means you have to get creative in the execution of the products at the store level."

Mix and match, be it colour and texture, layered, or old and new, is also popular right now. Vintage looks are

Linen Chest recently unveiled a new 14,000-square-foot boutique concept that offers a warm inviting atmosphere with the latest technology in lighting, an active kitchen, interactive multimedia kiosks, and many other innovative merchandising concepts to give you a pleasurable shopping experience. Below, a wall of glass demonstrates the depth and breadth of product carried in stores.





also very strong and have a cool friction with more modern looks.

Schofield adds “what differentiates us from other retailers is our diversity of product. So many stores today look like everything is made in the same factory. We strive for a good blend of national brands and privately-branded merchandise.

“We also have great staff that are each dedicated to a certain area of the store. For example, we have a kitchen specialist, mattress expert and bridal registry directors. They really know their business, and it shows, in the level of personalized service our customers get in return. There’s nothing better than going into a store and having someone help you out, who really knows the product.

Kitchen and gourmet product manager Kathy Rutt focuses on electrical appliances, cookware, knives, bakeware, gadgets and specialty items.

“I always try to purchase products that are the newest, latest or greatest in technology,” she explains. ‘Consumers are in the kitchen more than ever and they spend a lot of time preparing meals, cooking for their loved ones and entertaining.’

She adds that “our industry is really booming thanks to great chefs such as Ricardo who show us how easy it is to tackle most kitchen prep tasks.”

Rutt claims that what sets Linen Chest apart from the rest of the retail market place is their ability to specialize



A circular display of coffeemakers takes centre stage in the small appliance section, above. Below, stores now feature full-service demo kitchens and multi-room displays.

in certain categories by offering a greater depth and breadth of products with a proper matrix set-up.

Savvy staff that know what they are doing and have passion for the merchandise has also contributed to Linen Chest’s continued growth and success. When talking to *Home Style*, Stan Leibner’s pride is evident, not only in his mothers accomplishment, but also in the creative staff that are dedicated to carrying on their mission year after year.

Surviving 50-plus years in an ever changing retail landscape, Leibner concedes they have faced numerous chal-

lenges and changes over five decades.

“Today’s biggest challenges are dealing with the growth in state-of-the-art logistics and IT,” he says. “Competition gets harder and harder every year with the arrival of more big box stores. But I think at Linen Chest, we tell a different story. We’re much more fashionable in our assortments, offering more mid- to upscale items. Plus, the way we service our customer is superior to any big box store, right across the board.”

Kathy Rutt adds “Linen Chest has established a loyal customer base thanks to our unbelievable level of service, great quality merchandise and proper market place pricing.”

Linen Chest also has a firm and very effective price policy guarantee. If the customer can find the same merchandise elsewhere at a lower price, they will give an additional 10% off as a reward for letting them know. The company stands by it’s low price guarantee all year long.

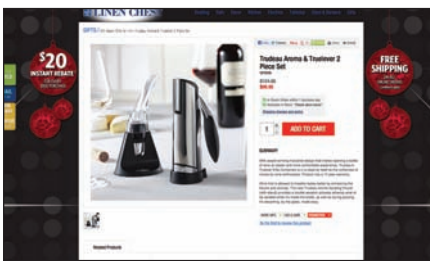
Looking to the future, Stan Leibner believes “we’ve got a good formula and as more people get a chance to discover Linen Chest, I am confident they will become a loyal customer.’

At 61, he is still fully entrenched in the business, visiting trade shows and vendors in Toronto, New York and China, and buying much of the store’s textiles and linens. He is passionate about his desire to “always give con-





Though Linen Chest still relies on traditional 16-page flyers (below centre), the company also has an interactive website, below. At the bottom is one of the stunning new window displays.



sumers the absolute best products as well as the very best customer service".

When asked how his mom was able to run a busy home and a growing retail business, Stan remembers "she gave us our breakfast and then my father took us to school. When we returned home, there were often times that we would fend for ourselves when it came to supper. Luckily we had a charge account at the deli, so we always ate well, and we all had a good time. We were five close brothers who looked after each other but our parents were always behind us."

The Linen Chest story began with founder Sylvia Leibner's vision. She felt fortunate to be able to see her dream become a reality and continued to work until she was 75 years old. "The employees all loved her" recalls Stan.

Her story continues to evolve because Sylvia Leibner was not only a retail pioneer but a woman who gave new meaning to the old saying "necessity is the mother of invention." She was a woman who wanted to make a comfortable home for her family, and to help others do the same for theirs. Her sons carry on their mother's vision to offer the best products at the best prices with pride and passion.

Luckily for Linen Chest customers, Sylvia Leibner was not a typical 1960s housewife. She was a smart, ambitious mother of five who chose to work outside the home. Yet as her success clearly demonstrates, she always knew that home is where the heart is. 🐾

The IHA and International Home + Housewares Show created the **gia** program in 1999 to foster innovation and excellence in home and housewares retailing throughout the world. The competition is structured on a two-tier level, national and global, to honour independent and chain store housewares retailers for excellence in several business categories, including store design, visual merchandising and customer service.

Each of 23 national **gia** winners is invited to the International Home + Housewares Show in Chicago where an expert global **gia** jury plus a rotating group of co-sponsoring trade publication editors from around the world, will select up to five **gia** Global Honorees as well as the winner of the Martin M. Pegler Award for Excellence in Visual Merchandising.

In Canada, *Home Style Magazine* has been a proud sponsor the **gia** award since it's inception. This year we are delighted to honour Linen Chest at the gala dinner in March.

international home
+housewares show
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