

by Katie Wilson

# A Second Chance in *Bridal*

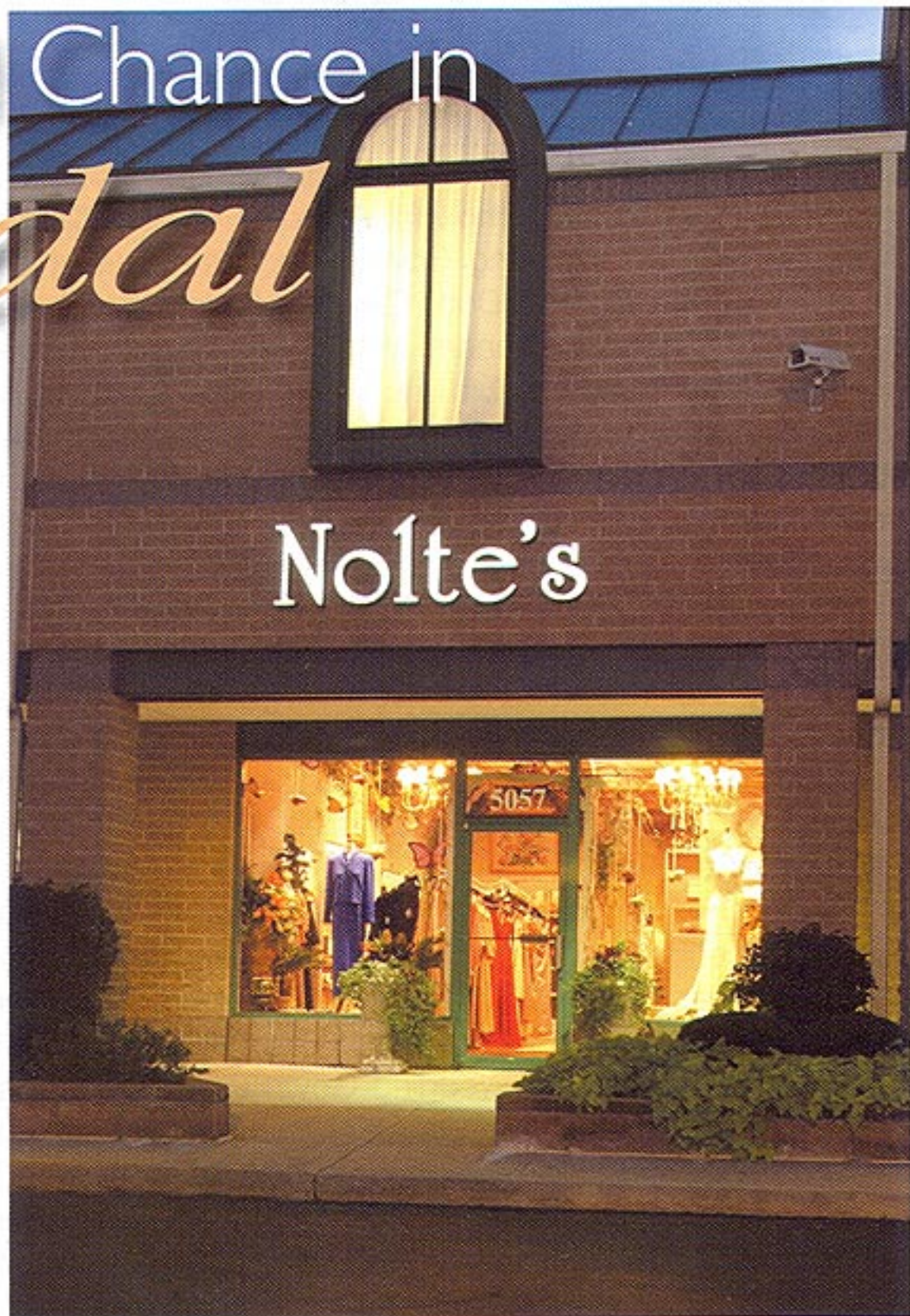
A tragedy and its lessons reveal the worthiness of both a store and its owner.

## WHERE IS IT?

Just one mile across the Missouri-Kansas border, Overland Park functions as the heart and home to Nolte's Bridal Collections. From a prosperous suburb of Kansas City, the store has served Miss Americas, Missouri brides and national customers alike. It's located in Hawthorne Plaza, a shopping center boasting 46 privately owned shops and Talbots' highest-selling store.

On June 5, 2003, Michael Nolte, owner of Nolte's Bridal Collections in Overland Park, Kan., woke up for the first time in 13 days. Through a gradual consciousness, he slowly took in a hospital room wallpapered in cards, perfumed with abundant flower arrangements, and filled with various gifts and fruit baskets.

Two weeks earlier and 50 minutes from home, a trooper had pulled over Nolte for driving too long in the left lane. The officer demanded Nolte come and sit in his Ford Crown Victoria while he wrote a ticket. As the pair sat in the front seat, an irresponsible driver rear-ended the



trooper's car. It exploded upon impact; the officer burned to death within minutes. But two witnesses pulled Nolte from the burning flames through a window, and Life Flight flew him to a trauma burn unit 100 miles away. Covered in third-degree burns over 40 percent of his body, Nolte wasn't expected to live. If he did, doctors believed he probably would never walk and were skeptical about whether he'd ever work again.

The morning of the accident, a reporter and former bridal customer of Nolte's, Amy Kapsalis, restrained tears as she broke the news in a live shot.

"It was the most overwhelming, horrible experience," she recalls. "I called every woman in my family who had just adored

him. He was always there to smooth things over. There were a lot of tensions between my mom and me during the wedding. He'd say, 'If there is a problem, let it be my problem.'"

Seeing that morning's news, Nolte's recently trained, wedding-assistant director rushed to the store to prepare for a business day unlike any other. She and the other staff members followed directions from Nolte's wife, Barbie, who called from the intensive care unit to help juggle frantic brides, persistent media and phones ringing off the hook.

"It was chaos – not even organized chaos," Nolte says. "But the staff soon developed a pattern for problem solving, and they received updates frequently from Barbie on how I was doing to

After the accident, Nolte realized he truly mattered to his industry and his customers as well.

To this day, Nolte treasures each and every card he was sent after his near-fatal accident.



Peering into Nolte's windows at dusk, customers see exquisite product displays and elegant decorative details.

assure clients that the store was still open and operating, and that weddings would still go on."

Throughout the three months of recovery, Nolte lay in the hospital bed, taking in the 2,000 cards and other gifts of support, the bulk of them from former store customers and bridal industry representatives, manufacturers and, to his surprise, competitors. Throughout 23 years in the wedding industry, he had learned to distance himself from brides and their families, so he was especially astonished to receive such heartfelt responses from them.

"It made me aware that the relationships that I had for years and thought were strictly business were really much deeper than that," Nolte says. Working with brides and their weddings, he says, "It's like having a baby, and once the baby is here, you never see the baby again. So I sort of protected myself from any emotional letdowns."

For Nolte, the accident helped reveal his purpose in life and what he meant to others, especially customers and bridal-industry members. And this onslaught of support inspired him to defy the doctors' bleak prognoses. Upon his homecoming, Nolte shakily walked through his front door, cheered on by 60 family members, friends and media. And with him, he brought his basket of cards.

### Big Bridal Moves: Nolte's Takes Shape

In 1980, Nolte opened his first bridal-business venture in Columbia, Mo., a florist and photography business in a corner of the established Suzanne's Bridal. He brought in so much additional business for Suzanne's that he jokingly told the owner one day: "The only way I can stay is if I can buy you out." Surprisingly, the owner considered the jest and sold Nolte the business.

"I bought out Suzanne's and made my first error," he says. "I paid way too much money for inventory that was dated and a name I wasn't going to use.

Customers  
are welcomed  
in the store as if  
they're guests in the  
Noltes' home.

It took me five years to pay down that mistake."

Nolte renamed the store for himself and says he worked "like a crazy man. I juggled all these balls in one hand: floristry, photography, tuxedos, weddings, invitations and wedding coordinating." But he didn't stop there. In 1992, Nolte embarked upon a new development venture in an affluent Kansas City suburb, Overland Park, Kan. Located 100 miles from his original store, this "satellite" store offered upscale shopping in a 4,000-square-foot space. It featured a marble floor, large rotunda with a hanging chandelier, and even a drive-up portico entrance.

"It was an impressive, intimidating

store," he says. But when the lease ballooned, Nolte reconsidered his local market and options. He finally decided to close the Columbia store, relocate his family to Kansas, and build a new, smaller Nolte's within the Overland Park shopping center.

The 1998 move into the 1,800-square-foot space cut Nolte's rent in half. He focused product to brides, bridesmaids, mothers, special occasions, accessories and tuxedo rentals, and set an appointment-only policy for brides. Today, the store carries four maids lines in the moderate to bridge price points, and a dozen bridal designers starting at \$1,800. In addition to this product, Nolte's offers other services such as

alterations, wedding coordination and invitations.

When choosing the décor, Nolte chose a relaxed, "country French" theme with hardwood floors; carpeted dressing rooms; white-washed cedar beams; plastered walls painted in taupes; oriental rugs; faux paintings; and a corrugated, white-painted tin ceiling. Nolte also hired an artist to paint tasteful vines and topiaries on the walls. But as a father of three daughters, Nolte purposely avoided "prissy, feminine" décor.

"I always want to make our stores gender-friendly," Nolte says. "I do not endorse a bride bias at all, and I see no value in excluding the groom and the father of the bride, who is (often) writing all the checks for her. I think it is a 'parent-daughter' experience." And customers have responded favorably to that ambiance. Mothers who had visited the first Overland Park store "for daughter #1 and then returned for daughter #2" raved about the change, Nolte says. "They said, 'I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but I wasn't sure if I could afford your first store. And in this store I feel more comfortable and am not intimidated,'" he says. "I want brides to feel comfortable coming in wearing flip-flops and capris, and they do."

While Nolte's décor puts customers at ease, "comfort" also plays a key role in the store's features and how employees deliver service. When customers walk in the door, they're immediately welcomed as if they're guests in the Noltes' home.

"What would you do in your home?" Nolte asks. "You'd take their coat, and offer them something to eat and drink. We've got Bud Light, Chablis, Diet Coke, Coke or water. We ask them what they would like and tell them immediately what we have."

The staff member attends to the customer's request and serves it in a real glass with a cocktail napkin featuring the store's logo in gold foil.

"It's a little touch, and I always tell

Each dressing room features its own private "dressing chamber."



From wood floors and period rugs to wall and ceiling accents, the entire store exudes a country French theme.



A glass of wine with a Nolte's cocktail napkin adds a special element to the customer experience.

our clients on their first visit, 'I know you'll feel at home when you help yourselves out of the hospitality bar,'" Nolte says.

Also within Nolte's, a glassed-in conference room provides a secluded setting where brides and their families hold private conversations, or where Nolte or another sales person can meet with customers.

"We can just sit down together; the bride may need to have a bit of a meltdown over family dynamics or whatever," Nolte says. He's also installed a phone in case customers need to make private phone calls.

Additionally, Nolte upholstered the walls to absorb sound and installed lighting on dimmers to promote serenity. He feels the soft hue reinforces the comfortable ambiance, an effect, he says, that makes clients feel "surrounded and embraced."

Nolte also considered clients' feelings

when designing the dressing rooms. "Some stores have telephone booth-size changing rooms, and the bride struggles to get into the dress and then

has to step out and into the showroom. Then she has all this input from customers she doesn't even know, and sometimes it doesn't fit. I've always thought how uncomfortable and inconspicuous that would be," he says.

So Nolte's conducts private fittings. Each dressing room has a "dressing chamber" created by a curtain, hanging from a track on the ceiling, and here the customer changes. The dressing room door is never completely closed, which allows staff members to easily enter and retrieve products if necessary.

"It's kind of like a doctor's exam room, where you change into your hospital gown," Nolte says. "It allows me, as a man, to be in all the dressing rooms, and we know where they're at in the process. Also, I can step in and assist with closing a sale and do so comfortably because the doors are partially open, and yet the bride still has her private dressing chamber within the dressing room."

Finally, Nolte pays special attention to the comfort of his store's bathrooms. He believes customers have a "takeaway impression" of a business when they visit the powder room, so he makes sure that impression is a positive one.

"I want my brides to think, 'Gosh, they make sure the restroom is so nice and clean that I bet they'll take even better care of my gown,'" he says. Visitors see those efforts in the marble floor, needlepoint rug, antique chest, fresh flowers, scented candles, hand lotions and country French wallpaper.

"Not a week goes by that we don't get compliments about the restroom," Nolte says. "It's as nice as the powder room in your house."

### Teamwork and Training Ensures Service Success

Whether it's cleaning the prized

**Nolte never asks his staff to do anything he wouldn't do himself.**



Nolte uses this room as an office, as well as a sanctuary for brides who need privacy or a quiet planning place.