

FULLERTON STORIES

Capri Shoes: 50 Years of Custom Shoes

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Story by **Elaine Murphy/FullertonStories.com** --

In a bright and airy workroom at Capri Shoes, a sewing machine whirs as its operator attaches two pieces of leather to form the upper part of a custom-designed shoe. This step is one of many in the intricate process of shoemaking, a traditional art that has been passed down through generations at the 50-year-old Fullerton business that has earned a reputation for its excellence in shoemaking.

There is nothing on the building's tan exterior indicating its owner's prestige, but inside the warehouse, a room dedicated to Disney shoe repairs, rows of Goofy's oversized kicks, and a shelf of tawny leather labeled "Jessie + Woody" signal the company's long relationship with Disney and other big-name clients. The company has worked with the Disneyland Resort and Disney Cruise Line since the park's early years, and is currently Disney's only manufacturer and repairer of performance shoes. Capri Shoes has also signed Cirque du Soleil, the Blue Man Group, the Los Angeles Opera, movie studios, and local theaters and playhouses. Although many of its handmade performance shoes are standardized in different sizes, the business can produce a custom pair for a performer whose foot is a different size or shape. Aside from making theater shoes, the company takes custom orders from individuals seeking unique footwear.

Like many people who run a family business, owner Oscar Navarro inherited a love of his trade from his father. Navarro moved from Mexico to California, where his father was already in business as a cobbler, at age 20. Eager to adjust to his new surroundings, Navarro enrolled in Buena Park High School to learn English and graduated at age 27 and later enrolled at Fullerton College.

Upon moving to California in 1980, Navarro learned the art of shoemaking from David Dakos, who founded Capri Shoes in 1963. At the time, it was solely a shoe repair business, and Dakos – whom Navarro regards as a father figure – taught him to excel in the trade. After 12 years of repairing theater shoes, Navarro realized he could make a better product; when he took over Capri Shoes in 1992, he expanded the business to include manufacturing. Then, he had three employees; today, he has a staff of 22, and hopes that his son Oscar Jr., who is currently a college student, will run the business someday. The company turns 50 years old this year, and is celebrating with a gala.

Navarro enjoys a luxury most other businesses don't have: because his is unique in the area, he has no immediate competitors. A lack of competition doesn't necessarily mean an automatic influx of clients, though – when Capri Shoes started its manufacturing side of the business,

An advertisement for Lindsey Acton, a Real Estate Executive. It features a photograph of a large, modern building with a prominent entrance. The text includes her name "LINDSEY ACTON" in red, her phone number "714-801-0175" in red, and the text "PROUD SPONSOR OF THE FULLERTON ATHLETE OF THE WEEK". At the bottom, there is a small photo of Lindsey Acton, the "REALTY EXECUTIVES PREMIER" logo, and her contact information: "LINDSEY ACTON 714-801-0175" and "BRO. 01849248 3201 N. HARBOUR BLVD. #5, FULLERTON, CA 92835".

Navarro initially gained new clients by knocking on doors and pitching his proven work ethic and craftsmanship skills. Now, he relies on word of mouth with no advertisements, and prides himself in earning the trust of large companies and in the transparency of his business.

Shoemaking, done entirely by hand without mass-production machinery, is a traditional art that produces a truly custom shoe each time. The laborious, intricate process begins by measuring a client's foot and tracing its shape on paper. Material is added to a solid, plastic, shoe-shaped mold called a last to customize the mold to represent each person's foot. The shoemaker then draws a pattern or design on cardboard, traces it onto leather, and cuts the leather with a knife. The pieces for the upper shoe are stitched together and fitted over the last. The soles are added and, if necessary, the entire shoe is painted a uniform color. Details like gemstones or rivets are added as a last step before fitting the shoe with the customer in person. Navarro says most of his shoes are designed by the client, who instructs him as to the design and materials of the shoe to match certain styles or eras in performances.

"It's a dying art," he says of shoemaking, before adding that he is passionate about the trade and loves his profession.



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