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## Lafayette Pack and Ship Brings Boutique Feel to Mail

By A.K. Carroll



Owners Ian and Sue McKinlay at Lafayette Pack and Ship Photos A.K. Carroll

busy customers. They hope to offer a more personalized "boutique" sort of experience in a fast-paced business where lines abound and service can be less than cheery.

Pack and Ship's special services include custom gift-wrapping and curbside drop off. The store also prides itself on being a "one stop shop" that can pack and ship "almost anything" to "almost anywhere."

By offering overnight, two-day, three-day and ground delivery through FedEx, USPS and DHL, the McKinlays are able to help their customers determine the best and cheapest delivery option. The store also offers copy, print and document services, provides passport photos and sells greeting cards, gift wrap, stamps, mailers and office supplies.

When the McKinlays were developing their business in Denver, they tried to come up with services that would make shipping as simple and convenient as possible and developed the concept of curb-side drop off. Busy customers can call from the (free) parking lot behind the shop or pull right up to the curb outside the door. The McKinlays will take the packages directly, process them that day, and make follow-up calls to swap credit card information for tracking information. It requires an element of trust on both sides, which apparently is the price of convenience.

"It saves people the hassle," said McKinlay, recounting scenarios of babies and strollers and rushing to make meetings. When I asked about payment, she was pleasantly optimistic. "People love to be trusted," said McKinlay. "Keep in mind we've got their box. When we take their things, process them and call them, they've got their credit card in hand. They wouldn't dream of not paying. We've never ever had anyone not pay."

"It has always been in the cards," said Sue McKinlay, when I asked why she and her husband, Ian, moved from Denver to California, where they run the new Lafayette Pack and Ship, located on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Originally from London, the McKinlays had long been planning to pack up their Colorado shipping business (which they sold last February) in order to spend more time with their daughter and her family, who live in Orinda.

After 25 years in the shipping industry, opening a local independent pack and ship was a natural next step for the couple to take in their new home. They had been looking for something suitable for some time before the space on Mt. Diablo Boulevard in the former home of Novina Jewelry, next to Amarin Thai, became available last May. The McKinlay's signed for the location in May and moved in September. The build out of the shop, which has been totally transformed, took nearly four months and opened Dec. 14. The McKinlays run the shop single (or rather dual) handedly.

"What we've always tried to do is concentrate on good service," said McKinlay. "It's how far you're prepared to go to help people [that really makes a difference]." Working in the heart of downtown Denver, the McKinlays learned best practices in accommodating to the specific needs of

This personal attention and desire to go the extra mile are what McKinlay feels sets independent stores like hers apart from the chains, and are a big component of what she and Ian hope to offer at Lafayette Pack and Ship. When there's no franchise governance, it's easier to be accommodating and creative. "We've always been in our stores," said McKinlay. "I feel that's what sets us apart."

In addition to dropping off mail at Lafayette Pack and Ship, you can also pick up mail. Targeted at small and home-based businesses, the store offers mailbox rental for roughly 60 cents a day. A Pack and Ship mailbox is attached to a street address, rather than a standard PO box, which can legitimize a company and give a stronger sense of security. In keeping with the boutique concept of providing every convenience possible, the store offers to receive all parcels and packages and will even call the moment they are delivered.

That also has an added layer of security both in terms of location anonymity and the protection of mail and parcels. In their interactions with locals, the McKinalys have learned that stolen mail is a local issue. Pack and Ship has 84 mailboxes with ample availability (as opposed to the UPS down the street where there is a waitlist for box rental). They also accept large packages from UPS and FedEx as one-off deliveries.

With a colorful décor, a myriad of services and cheery attentive experts waiting on your every need and ready to answer any question, Lafayette Pack and Ship hopes to put some of the fun back into shipping.

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There are 84 mailboxes located at the Lafayette store.

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