



Former nurse Julie Lopez found it impossible to buy shoes that were elegant and comfortable enough for her to wear to her daughter's wedding in 2010, so she gave up her job and launched her own footwear brand.

PHOTO CREDIT: JULIE LOPEZ SHOES

Heels without pain

Julie Lopez traces a bunion on her foot to the extensive time she spent playing basketball as a teenager. Decades of nursing, notorious for keeping people on their feet for long periods of time, did little to help and by 2010, when her daughter celebrated her wedding, Ms Lopez struggled to find a pair of shoes that were suitably stylish and still comfortable enough to wear.

Such was her indignation that she gave up nursing and spent the next two years researching and learning about shoes. By 2012, she decided she was far from alone in desiring comfort as well as elegance in shoes and that the time was right to launch her own brand, Julie Lopez Shoes, incorporating special, patent-pending comfort technology. Her idea was to make heels that women, even those with foot problems, could wear for extended periods of time. "I know a lot of women suffer from idiosyncrasies with their feet," she explains. "I've seen research that claims that staggering numbers of women in the US alone have bunions, somewhere between 30% and 50% of all the women in the country. For some of us, the body make-up can lead toward a bunion because we naturally pronate our feet in a certain way, and then we can exacerbate that by putting our feet into certain types of shoes."

It was immediately clear to her that, in addition to her

Former nurse Julie Lopez had such a struggle finding shoes she could wear to her daughter's wedding that she gave up her job and devoted herself to sourcing stylish but comfortable high-heeled shoes that she has now launched under her own brand name.

comfort technology ideas (more on which later), the shoes would need to be manufactured with the finest quality and craftsmanship available. This meant turning to Italy, with the first four styles becoming available for a "soft launch" of the brand in 2012. Her vision of "beautiful heels without the pain" had become a reality.

Ms Lopez confirms: "I've always loved heels. I'd say they just allow me to feel more feminine, more womanly. When you have heels on, you hold your body differently, in a more attractive position; you move differently. I can be a tomboy with the rest

PUTTING THE HEELS THROUGH THEIR PACES

I'm sure plenty of women will, at some stage in their lives, have been in so much pain in their high heels that taking them off and walking through dirty, potentially glass-strewn streets has either a) been done, or b) looked like an attractive option. Men will never understand: "Why go through that amount of pain?" – but what would they know.

As women get older, however, the pain/aesthetic threshold diminishes, and the idea of suffering for one's art (vanity?) seems less appealing. The Julie Lopez heels were constructed to provide an answer by offering both height and comfort. The side vents let the shoes 'give', which prevents rubbing on the upper foot, and the cushioning around the sole means they ease pressure on the ball. The angle of the instep also adds to the comfort – many traditional pumps have such a steep gradient that the body's weight is concentrated on a small area of the ball, giving meaning to the maxim 'beauty equals pain'. But thankfully, with the Lopez shoes, the gentler slope meant my weight was distributed more evenly across the ball of the foot so I didn't feel like I was walking on tip-toes.

After putting the shoes through their paces around the city – and Liverpool has its fair share of hills and cobbles – the pavements were no longer my enemy. I was happy to stand for long periods, and it was refreshing to wake up afterwards without the familiar aches. The shoes could be easily worn every day – perfect for the woman who's not ready to succumb to house slippers quite yet...



The Layla style from the Julie Lopez range.

PHOTO CREDIT: JULIE LOPEZ SHOES

of them, but I know that if I wear tennis shoes to walk around the park, I'm inclined to be more lazy in my gait. Whereas, if I have a pair of heels on, even with jeans, I feel more confident, more in control, and that's an attractive feature in itself."

Academic support

Her opinion appears to have the support of an academic team at the University of Portsmouth in the south of England. In a study published at the end of 2012, researchers at the university concluded that high-heeled shoes help a woman look attractive because of the effect they have on the way her whole body moves.

Research involved asking observers (men and women) to gauge the attractiveness of a range of women from their walk. The women were filmed wearing shoes with a six-centimetre heel and, at different times, flat shoes. The technology used in the study meant the observers watched only a pattern of lights.

Ten women featured in the study; all ten were judged to look more attractive and more feminine when wearing heels. The team from the University of Portsmouth concluded that women wearing heels were more likely to attract admiring glances because of the way their hips, shoulders, legs, knees and feet move as a result of wearing the shoes. Researchers found that, on average, the women walked more quickly when wearing heels, increasing the number of strides per minute from 106 to 110 steps. However, their stride shortened with high-heeled shoes on their feet, from 1.24 metres in length to 1.2 metres. The numbers, it seems, translate into added glamour and desirability.

No pain, just gain

An obvious conclusion to draw from this is that, even if high-heeled shoes are uncomfortable to wear, they are worth putting up with. But Julie Lopez's contention is that women should not have to put up with the discomfort or with the harm uncomfortable footwear can cause. So as well as choosing her manufacturing partners carefully to make sure the shoes that bear her name are a high quality product, well made from carefully chosen leather from Italian tanneries, she has devoted a lot of thinking time to making them comfortable.

With the patents still pending, there are things she cannot say about her North Carolina-based brand's proprietary comfort technology, but she will confirm that the ideas are mostly concentrated in the forefoot area of the shoe to alleviate pressure there and help decrease painful joint inflammation. They include three millimetres of padding in the forefoot region for shock absorption. There is also a system for "manipulating" the leather in strategic parts of the upper by adding Lycra to the backing material and by inserting vents, which work like a gusset in sewn apparel, the company founder explains, giving a small amount of stretch exactly where it's needed.

The location of seams in the upper, especially in the vamp, is something else she has paid close attention to, with the aim of avoiding friction as much as possible. For the same reason, the toe-box is slightly wider than usual to allow the foot to remain in a more natural position, minimising stress and



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Quality counts. Ms Lopez searched for, and found, a manufacturing partner in Italy who could turn her vision into real shoes. PHOTO CREDIT: JULIE LOPEZ SHOES

decreasing pain. A further detail is non-slip padding on the sole of the shoe for better traction on slippery surfaces. "I've been a stickler for attention to detail," Ms Lopez says. "I know the things that affect my feet and I have set out to avoid them."

Artisan appeal

She explains that one of her biggest challenges was to reach a level of understanding with the artisan footwear manufacturers in Italy who are now working on Julie Lopez shoes. "Beauty is all for them," she says, not without admiration. "I'm not sure comfort was in their vocabulary." But she says her relationship with her manufacturing partners is "working beautifully" now, helped by the fact that the owner of the factory in Italy was one person who did understand why Ms Lopez's bunion affects her views on shoes so deeply; he has a bunion too. She wanted to go to Italy and put herself out to make the relationship work because she wanted those levels of craftsmanship to go into the shoes and because she knew Italy's gifted artisans were the right people to entrust with the task of turning her vision into real shoes that real women can wear the vision she had in her mind.

Near the end of 2012, Ms Lopez began to build a team back in the US to launch the brand fully and bring a full-scale line of shoes to the market. Additional styles, colourways and designs came out at the start of 2013 and the company announced that it will extend the line to flats and kitten heels, as well as heels up to ten centimetres in height. There will even be an official global launch party, at the Platform event in Las Vegas in August, part of the Magic exhibition.

"This is all about trying to make sure women can put the shoes on," Julie Lopez says. "It's the coolest thing to have women say they haven't dared to put on heels in years, sometimes ten years, but that now they have heels they can wear. And I want women to know that every one of our shoes will be comfortable. No woman will have to wonder if a shoe she likes is wearable. She will know that if she buys Julie Lopez, we have paid all the necessary attention to detail to make it comfortable for her. She will be able to look at the shoe and base her decision to buy it on what it looks like on her foot and how much she likes it. Just like any woman buying any shoe." 🌀