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Charlie Hustle returning to founder's vintage Jayhawk roots with Lawrence shop

By: Tommy Felts · March 23, 2018



Chase McNulty, Charlie Hustle

A new retail space in Lawrence will be a homecoming of sorts for Chase McNulty — taking Charlie Hustle back to the college city where he first wove his passion for vintage threads into a business.

“It’s huge for me personally because it’s kind of come full circle,” the founder, owner and CEO said.

Overlooking the University of Kansas campus, the 300-square-foot, shipping container-style shop will find its home within the new McLain’s Market restaurant in the former Jayhawk Bookstore at 1420 Crescent Road, McNulty said.

Charlie Hustle — and its iconic KC Heart tee — first made a big splash in Kansas City during the Royals’ historic 2014 and 2015 World Series runs, but the business traces its roots back to McNulty’s college days in Lawrence when he resold vintage T-shirts.

“What was beautiful about them was just the fit and feel, the stories that they told, the simplicity of design. It was kind of becoming my passion back then,” he said. “I didn’t know it, but I loved it.”

McNulty specifically wanted a cooler Jayhawk shirt than what was being sold new at the time, he said.

Today, of course, Charlie Hustle has licensing rights to produce not only McNulty’s own University of Kansas tees, but a wide-range of collegiate wear — from K-State and Wichita to Missouri and Iowa. Getting such licenses allows Charlie Hustle to sift through treasure troves of old sports designs to reimagine and recreate “vintage made fresh” imagery, McNulty said.



Charlie Hustle

The Lawrence shop will sell about 80 percent KU wares from Charlie Hustle, along with a sprinkling of Lawrence, Kansas, and KC Heart-themed items, he said. The company has hired a handful of workers for the location, and expects to be open by the end of the month when the restaurant is complete.

It will be Charlie Hustle's first major retail location outside its flagship store on the Country Club Plaza, though the T-shirt maker has products across the city and in Scheels stores throughout the nation.

A key component of the Lawrence space will be Charlie Hustle's use of flooring from the KU basketball team's 2008 NCAA championship, which was secured from the university, McAnulty said.

"It's amazing," he said. "I was like, 'Yes! This is exactly what I was looking for!'"

Building a wicked wardrobe

At age 20 and living in Lawrence, McAnulty was fascinated by the vintage designs of 1985 Royals T-shirts, 1988 Jayhawk tees and a range of concert shirts from decades past, he said.

"They had these perfect imperfections," he said. "Growing up in the '90s and early 2000s, I think a lot of garment design got away from those classic looks."

McAnulty's first instinct was to collect and resell the vintage items on eBay, he said. The online marketplace was in its heyday at the time, and it kept him busy, he said.

"There were levels of small success in these one-off T-shirts, but once you sold it, it was gone," he said.

McAnulty purchased used clothing in bulk from "rag houses" in Houston, Texas, he said. The process was hit and miss. Fifty pounds would equal 150 to 200 T-shirts, but out of those, only about 20 would be worth trying to sell, he said.

"My parents' basement was just flooded with vintage T-shirts. They smelled bad. It was terrible ... But if you got any really good ones, some of them would sell for \$200 or \$300, so you'd make your money back," McAnulty said. "It was a lot of work and it didn't make a ton of sense. It wasn't something I could do forever."

His mother, herself a graphic designer, encouraged him to "get out of basic college mode" — shifting his focus from capturing one-off gems to creating his own designs, he said. Attending the Kansas City Art Institute allowed McAnulty to hone his talents.

He launched a blog and online retail shop called Wicked Threadz, while still living in Lawrence. The site sold vintage shirts, as well as McAnulty's own designs. (One of his first was the Danny and the Miracles tee that continues to be a popular seller for Charlie Hustle.)



A stint as a corporate designer further matured McAnulty's skills and understanding of the market, he said, but he knew he couldn't continue working a full-time job and returning home to run Wicked Threadz overnight.

No. 16 heads to the World Series

Charlie Hustle launched in October 2012 with McAnulty investing all he had into the business, he said. He moved back into his parents' basement in Prairie Village. He was living on Ramen noodles, he said.

"It took about a year to build up the business, getting the branding right," McAnulty said. "It was all a refined version of everything I had experienced at a young age. We sold 27 shirts in the first day, which is great."

"We still have days where it's 27 shirts," he added, laughing.

Among Charlie Hustle's 16 debut designs was the KC Heart, McAnulty said.

"It actually was No. 16," he said. "We thought it could be this civic pride kind of thing. Little did we know, it was one of the tickets that really helped us to take off. Out of those first 27 shirts we sold, 14 of them were the KC Heart. So we knew we had something."

The design was inspired, in large part, by Kansas City imagery that came before it, McAnulty said.

"Back in the 1920s, the railroad stations had a pin with Kansas City written inside the heart. The [Country Club] Plaza actually had a variation of the KC inside the heart on light poles, and, of course, the Monarchs [Negro League baseball team] had a patch on their jersey," he said. "It's been a part of Kansas City history."

In summer 2013, Charlie Hustle hit a home run with some guerrilla marketing during the Big Slick Celebrity Weekend fundraiser organized by actors Paul Rudd, Eric Stonestreet, Jason Sudeikis, Rob Riggle and David Koechner.

"We put T-shirts in all the hotel rooms for the Big Slick. Instead of wearing the Big Slick shirts, all the celebrities were wearing the KC



Heart shirt,” McNulty said. “That was really huge for us because the city really got behind it.”

“What the celebrity aspect can do for a product is insane,” he added.

The seed for the KC Heart’s viral success was planted.

“Fast forward to 2014: The Royals are winning in the World Series, Paul Rudd pops up and says it’s his favorite shirt and he’s not going to take it off until we lose ... and unfortunately, of course, we lost in Game 7 with a man on third,” McNulty said.

High-profile visibility for the KC Heart was a double-edged sword, he said. Charlie Hustle didn’t anticipate the massive fan reaction to the design.

“I remember Oct. 29, 2014, I was sitting across the table at dinner with Holly, my wife — my future wife at the time — and we were almost in tears,” he said. “We were like, ‘What are we gonna do? How do we fix this? How do we package all of these orders?’ Our screen printers couldn’t keep up. Our suppliers couldn’t keep up. It was just this fascinating, quick growth.”

“It was a turning point,” he added. “We thought, ‘If we can get through this, we can really make this thing work.’”



A year to scale

McNulty isn’t content to simply ride the success of one iconic design, he said.

“I didn’t get into this to be ‘The KC Heart T-shirt Guy.’ I got into it to build a regional and national company,” he told a crowd in February at Rockhurst University’s Meet the Makers event.

While the popularity of the image helped propel the business to its current high brand awareness, a well-trafficked store on the Country Club Plaza and soon the Lawrence retail spot, McNulty said its future lies in a deliberately diversified, but personalized approach to various Midwestern markets.

“Our core focus has to be a mix of the collegiate side and the hometown side,” he said. “How do we apply the culture we’ve built in Kansas City to St Louis or Omaha? Denver? Chicago? We’re working on that. It’s about creating their own KC Heart — but not the heart. How can we take some of the iconic things from their history and rebuild them?”

Citing “Predictable Success” by Les McKeown — a book that has come to serve as a guide to business for McNulty — Charlie Hustle has entered the Year of Scale, he said.

“Right now, we’re trying to understand what it’s like to have 25 employees. Until this all started, I’d never managed one employee before, so it’s crazy,” McNulty said. “I’ve spent the past few years really just diving into what it means to be a CEO. I think it’s hilarious to even call myself a CEO.”

The book warns Charlie Hustle’s sixth year will be a tough one, he said.



Chase McNulty, Charlie Hustle

"We're in a process that tells you, 'Hey, some good people are going to be let go. Some people who grew with you, who supported you in the beginning ... they don't quite have the capacity to get you where you're going,'" he said. "That doesn't make them bad people, but you've got to learn to make those decisions and go with it."

McAnulty smiles as he talks about taking the leaps of faith and sacrifices that led Charlie Hustle to the point that he was recently able to purchase the business's headquarters building at 18th and Cherry streets in the Crossroads.

He credits much of his success to his mother, the late Deborah McNulty — a pioneering creative at Lenexa-based Gear for Sports, formerly Winning Ways, he said.

"My mother has been a guiding force," he said. "She was always pushing me and inspiring me to get into the graphic arts."

On Tuesday, McNulty and his family commemorated four years since his mother's passing at 56. Though she died before seeing her son achieve notoriety with the KC Heart, McNulty said he continues to draw motivation from her life.

"The timing was bittersweet," he said. "It felt like she was telling us, 'Take everything you've learned and go on with the rest of your life. Tomorrow's not given, so give back and do something today.' I think I'm living a lot of those values that were instilled in me by her — even if I didn't always understand them."