



THE AUSTRALIAN FRIDAY DECEMBER 22 2006

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If the shoe sticks

She is a mother, lawyer and renowned tax expert, but all haute couture fanatic Louise McBride can think about is keeping her heels on, writes Edwina McCann



Shoo-in: McBride's Shoosticks

LOUNGING as she is in her exquisite Christian Lacroix couture gown, estimated value in excess of \$30,000, in her stunning Sydney harbourside apartment, it's hard to imagine that just six months ago Louise McBride was reassessing her life and feeling down on her luck.

"I was in the middle of a terrible year and I was sitting on my bed with tears streaming down my face thinking: 'I can't keep my house, my husband or my job, and can't even keep my bloody shoes on,'" she says.

With that last thought, McBride, the gun tax legal mind, became the woman who invented Shoosticks, a simple but effective strip of silicone designed to keep sling-back shoes and flip-flops stuck to your feet.

Today McBride should really be working on a paper for the Taxation Institute of Australia on "vested and indefensible interest in trust estates: has the High Court decision on CPT custodians really altered the landscape?". Instead, she is tying up bundles of Shoosticks with black ribbon thinking how nice they would look on a Christmas tree. Perhaps that's just escapism, but it seems her invention has come to symbolise getting her life back on track and her excitement about it is palpable.

In legal circles and to readers of this newspaper, McBride is one of the most respected minds in taxation. She has been a contributing columnist for *The Australian* and adviser to the Howard Government on tax reform, and was formerly a solicitor with the Grant Samuel merchant bank. That was the job she mentioned she couldn't keep, which all worked out for the best because the moment of crisis on her bed pushed her to finally take her colleagues' advice and go to the Bar.

She was subsequently accepted as a barrister and has since taken up rooms in Sydney's respected Wentworth Chambers.

"We got into a conversation about shoes and vanity, and it was then I realised women were never going to wear sensible shoes with laces if it made them look dumpty, so I decided to find something that would keep my shoes in place"

Louise McBride

In contrast, to readers of *Vogue* and Sydney's social set McBride is known as a rare thing in Australia: a collector of haute couture. That's real haute couture, as in the collections shown by a few houses such as Chanel, Lacroix and Dior in Paris each July and January to select clients who choose pieces to be made to measure. The price tags always run into five figures. Chanel keeps a bustier of each of its haute-couture clients in its Parisian workshop and there is sure to be one with McBride's name on it.

For a fashion girl, McBride's wardrobe is something to behold. There's the first piece of couture she bought, a dramatic yellow and black polka dot Valentino gown, when her daughter Unity, now 19, was born. There's the embroidered, Belle Epoque-inspired bustled jacket and skirt from John Galiano's first Asian-influenced couture collection for Dior. Then there is the cupboard in the lounge room that opens to reveal a sea of Hermes orange fabric bags that contain — I count 12 but I suspect there are more — Birkin and Kelly handbags from Hermes. The neighbouring cupboard is home to a shoe collection that would make Imelda Marcos weep.

"Louise has always spent a lot of money on clothes," says old friend and public relations supremo Mark Patrick.

In France or the US that would be nothing unusual; successful women are often dedicated followers of fashion and collect it much the way people collect art. But in Australia an interest in fashion is often perceived as evidence of folly, the pursuit of the frivolous and the vacuous. McBride is proof of the contrary. But let's get back to the pivotal moment.

Her marriage of 23 years to advertising executive Greg Daniel had amicably fallen apart, and she'd just realised that despite her best efforts she wasn't going to be able to hold on to the family home in Sydney's Palm Beach.

"And as usual, I was running late and I had got dressed intending to wear fishnet stockings and some really fabulous red shoes, which were sling-backs, and I just knew I wouldn't be able to run to a meeting without having to stop every few metres to hitch up the wretched straps," McBride explains.

She tried to find something to secure the straps to her stockings. Sticky tape, Dr Scholl's tape and

Hollywood Fashion Tape (known in more crude terms as tit tape, the means by which starlets secure otherwise gaping dresses to their body parts for the red carpet) were all applied, resulting in a *Mr Bean*-like skit with McBride covered in tape. She almost threw the shoes at the wall in frustration "while contemplating why women are so stupid to insist on wearing non-practical shoes". That night in an effort to make her laugh, her friend Kim Carr and Unity decided on a late introduction to *Sex and the City* via DVD. Oddly, for a fashion addict, McBride had never seen an episode.

"I don't watch television," she says apologetically. In the opening credits actor Sarah Jessica Parker stops to pull up a sling-back. The image featuring Parker dressed in an Oscar de la Renta gown was splashed across billboards worldwide while the series was running.

"That was about as far as we got before I launched into a tirade of the morning's shoe disaster," McBride says. "So we got into a conversation about shoes and vanity, and it was then I realised women were never going to wear sensible shoes with laces if it made them look dumpty, so

I decided to find something that would keep my shoes in place. I think Kim said something like: 'That's right, Louise, don't fix the tax act or worry about the Middle East, just get those bloody shoes of ours to stay on, will you?'"

Five months, two trips to China, a business partner, a few fortuitous meetings with old friends and multiple bottles of red wine later, Shoosticks were born in "French boudoir" packaging that McBride hopes customers will use to house loose tampons when the sticks run out. "I hate them rolling around in the bottom of my bag," she says, wincing.

For McBride, realising her idea has come to mean a lesson in detachment. "Sorry to sound corny, but everything else I was trying to do was horribly hard," she says. "In fact, it was like wrestling a box constrictor in quick sand, and I was drowning."

"I was putting lots of effort into things that just were not fixable and something I happened to do — almost as an aside and as a distraction — with little effort, just fell into place. And it happened really when it was so bleak I couldn't see anything good ever happening. I felt like a terrible

failure. So for me the moral of the story is if you can have no attachment to the outcome, just when you think you can't take another punch, something good can come along."

Whether or not her invention is a raging success, McBride says she has learned a great deal — she may as well add "silicone expert" to her CV, so thorough is her knowledge of the substance that is her point of difference with this product — and her trips to China have opened her eyes to other opportunities.

She says she's sure she'll spend more time there, possibly advising on tax since China's anti-avoidance laws are modelled on Australia's. And anyway, tying up Shoosticks in bundles with black bows surely beats writing articles on fixed and indefensible interest in trusts.

However, the journey hasn't been without its setbacks. Fellow QC Tony Slater momentarily shocked McBride when he insisted that the product that secured shoes to feet already existed. "Black lace-up shoes," she says. "He said men have been wearing them forever."

Shoosticks are available in Sydney at Cosmopolitan shoes, Double Bay, and Valonz, Paddington.



Mother of invention: Louise McBride, amid her Marcos-esque heels collection, says Shoosticks were born of necessity

Pictures: Alan Pryke