

LATIN LIFT

After surviving immigration, the death of a spouse and a battle with dragons, Alberta-based entrepreneur Nora Furber is taking on a new challenge: fixing flat bums

BY LISA EVANS

PHOTOS BY JILL SHANTZ



While many new immigrants struggle to adapt to Canada's cold climate, learning English and navigating bureaucratic systems, Colombian-born Nora Furber had a different problem. She couldn't find a good pair of jeans. "I could never quite adjust to the boxy, boyish look of the North American jean," she says.

So she started her own label, Monjeloco Jeans. Her Latin-inspired lift-the-butt and tuck-the-tummy jeans won her a spot on CBC's *Dragons' Den* and, in 2013, she was honoured with the distinguished Latino Canadian Entrepreneur Award from the Latino Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

Today, business is booming. Her tiny shop in downtown St. Albert, Alberta (voted Best Place to Live in Canada by *MoneySense* magazine), is jam-packed with women all looking for one thing — to give their tush a push. I'm told there's often a lineup out the door on Saturdays. Furber has every reason to smile, but the road to success for this entrepreneurial single mom of two was paved with many difficult decisions and heartbreak.

and passed away 18 months later. "I found myself alone. I couldn't work 8 to 5 anymore because I was now a single parent and the kids needed me. I didn't know what I was going to do," she says.

During her years living in Canada, Furber had often thought about bringing the fun, colourful, sexy Latin fashion she loved to Canada. "Every time I went to Colombia and came back my friends here would comment on how nice my jeans were. I was never able to find a pair of jeans here [in Canada] that would fit the way I wanted," she says.

When Canada and Colombia signed the free trade agreement in 2008, Furber saw it as her chance to begin a new life. "It was a big risk because I invested my own money. This was the money that my husband left to me to raise my children, [but] I thought, 'Am I going to just continue surviving or should I take a chance and have faith?' I just decided OK, I'm going to do it," she says.

Furber flew to Medellin, the fashion capital of Colombia, and began designing her Latin-inspired jean for the Canadian woman. She



Photo by Jill Shantz

There's a secret to why women in St. Albert, Alberta, have great butts; Nora Furber's Latin-inspired jeans give them a boost.

Furber arrived in Edmonton on Dec. 15, 1984, wearing a green summer dress and sandals. "It was minus 30 degrees," she laughs. At 18 years old with no family or friends in Canada, Furber had one goal — to create a better life in a safe country, one she could eventually raise a family in.

Although she'd always dreamed of a career in the fashion industry and would take trips to West Edmonton Mall and imagine working at the high-end fashion shops, Furber knew she first needed to learn English. She enrolled in English as a second language courses at the University of Alberta and got a job as a nanny, living with an English-speaking family.

Soon she was working in the cosmetics department at London Drugs, where she stayed for 19 years. In the meantime, Furber fulfilled another dream — having a family. She married a Canadian chemical engineer named Daniel, and had two children, Mitchell and Jesse. But in 2001, Furber's world was shattered.

At 42 years old, Daniel was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer

and found a factory that employed single mothers, many of them widows like herself, and felt an immediate connection. "I empathize with them because [while] I'm a single mom in Canada, I definitely have a better life than these girls have in Colombia," she says. Together, Furber knew she and the Colombian women could do something big.

Manufacturing her jeans in Colombia also meant Furber could give back to her home country. "Colombia has a lot to offer and people don't know it. After all the problems they've had, they're trying really hard to have a different image and I like being a part of that," she says. In addition to promoting Colombian industry, Furber wants to show her sons that they can be proud of their Colombian heritage. "I'm Canadian by heart, but I'm still Colombian, too," she says.

Even her company's name, Monjeloco Jeans, connects to Furber's Latin background. Selected by her sons, who are now 23 and 19, Furber says the name combines two sides of her personality. A former yoga teacher, Furber has a calm and spiritual side, but she's

SUCCESS STORY

also an outgoing, colourful Latina. "The word *monje* means monk in Spanish and *loco* means crazy, so it's crazy monk," laughs Furber.

Bringing the Latin look to Canadian women required a few adjustments, however. "The Canadian woman is more conservative," says Furber. "If you go to Latin countries, the girls are wearing their jeans tighter. The bigger the butt, the better," she says. Monjeloco jeans are designed to lift the butt, creating a perfectly round silhouette and tucking in the tummy.

Since opening the shop's doors in 2012, Furber's butt-lifting jeans have made headlines and continue to receive rave customer reviews. She encourages anyone who dislikes their derriere to try on a pair of her jeans. "If you wear a regular jean and then you wear one of my jeans, your butt will grow three times bigger. If you already have a big butt, it's going to lift it, tuck it in and make it perfectly round," she says.

Furber and her staff have the most fun when couples come into the store together. "The woman tries on the jeans and right away you can see she's feeling sexy and the guy says 'Wow! I didn't know she had a bum like that!' and they're flirting and holding hands. We tell them to go out for a drink or to dinner and have a nice evening," says Furber with a laugh.

Despite the great response Furber received from women in her local Alberta community, she struggled with getting the word out across the country (she offers online shopping at monjelocojeans.com). So she took her lift-the-bum jeans to the television show *Dragons' Den* in October 2013, coming face to face with some of Canada's most influential business tycoons. Walking onto the set, Furber announced to the dragons: "I have a solution to a national problem." When she told them the problem was flat bums, they burst out laughing.

Furber brought three faithful customers to model the jeans — a



plus-sized woman, a mother of three young kids and a university student. She asked the women to wear their regular North American jeans then had them change into Monjeloco jeans. "When they came out, [the dragons] couldn't believe the difference," says Furber. "They actually got up and asked to touch the girls because they accused me of putting padding in the jean."

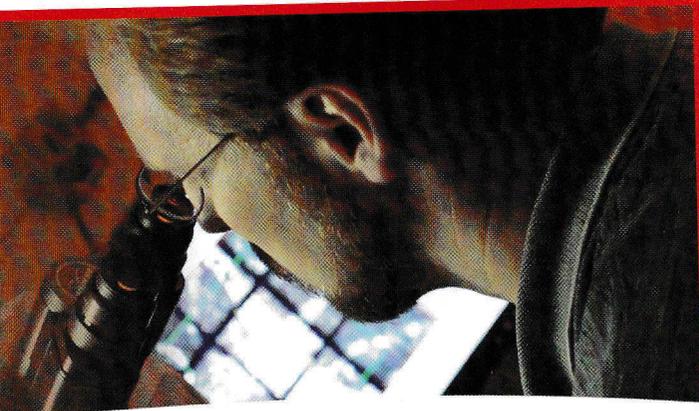
Although Furber didn't strike a deal in the *Den*, her appearance on the show gave a big boost to her butt-lifting business. "The day the show aired, the website crashed [because] there were so many hits on the site and when I got to the store, there was a line outside and it's been like that ever since," she boasts.

This July, the Dragons paid her a visit in St. Albert to do a follow-up, featuring the ever-growing status of Monjeloco, and the thriving support from the local community.

Furber has hopes that a deal with the Dragons will still be made. "This time we are definitely going to sign a deal," she says. 🍁



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