INNOVATORS: GERT BOYLE

The chairwoman of Columbia Sportswear faced serious difficulties when she took over the running of the company after the sudden death of her husband. But Gert Boyle has grown the small apparel firm into a $2 billion business – and the 90 year old has no intention of retiring soon.

The original tough mother



Gert Boyle after donating $100 million to Oregon Health & Science University's Knight Cancer institute.

Fritz Liedtke, courtesy of Oregon Health & Science University.

For a woman who trades on her hard exterior, Columbia Sportswear chairwoman Gert Boyle has a soft heart. She recently donated $100 million to the Knight Cancer Institute at Oregon Health and Science University after forging links with the centre through a connection to her late sister, Hildegard. The head of the institute, Brian Ducker, was a student of Hildegard's, an award-winning scientist who died of a brain tumour in 1984. When Nike co-founder James Knight announced in late 2013 he would match $500 million if the centre could raise it, Gert decided to play her part. "A great number of people die of cancer, wouldn't it be wonderful if you could do something about that?" she says. "It's just something I'd like to do to help somebody along the way."

In 1937, Gert and her family fled Nazi Germany for the US, sensing the dangers for a Jewish family; her mother's mother, who stayed behind, later died in a concentration camp. Gert's father, Paul, who had owned a shirt factory in Germany, was industrious and set about putting his skills to work, buying a hat company and naming it after the local river. Gert settled into American life, later meeting husband Neal at university and raising three children.

When Paul passed away he left the running of the company, now renamed Columbia Sportswear, to Neal. He expanded the business, branched into more apparel lines, and took on a $150,000 loan to cover the growth. "He took out the loan in September 1970, and by December he had died of a heart attack," recalls Gert. He was just 47. "Sitting in the house all day crying wouldn't have changed anything," says Gert, who was more accustomed to running a household than a business. "My mother had pledged her house as collateral for the loan. How would I have said to her: 'You know the house you've lived in for

40 years? You have to move'. I couldn't do that."

Things were difficult to start with. "We made every mistake in the book!" she says. Son Tom joined and the pair began to piece things together, having to deal with cancelled orders and suppliers who didn't believe they would get paid.

"We got to a point when things were really, really bad," she says. A buyer emerged – he offered $1,400 for the business, but wouldn't take on the loan. "I told him: 'For $1,400, I'll run it into the ground myself!'"

She cites this as a turning point. The company dropped the less-profitable workwear lines, laid off staff who didn't toe the party line, and refocused on outdoor clothing. Fashion moved in their favour. "Beginning in the mid-1970s, we reinvented ourselves and said, this is what we are," she says in her autobiography. "You can't be all things to all people. We stopped private labelling, focused on typical outdoor clothing, and started to go to larger suppliers."

The introduction of the Bugaboo – a ski jacket with removable lining – put the company on the map. Columbia has now sold in excess of six million. It also claims to be one of the first to incorporate Gore-Tex into its jackets.

Ma Boyle was born

In the 1980s and 1990s, a shrewd idea from a local advertising agency made Gert a household name. Styling her as the tough 'Ma Boyle', who tests Columbia gear on her 'hapless' son – including running over him with a snow plough and pushing him through a car wash to test waterproof jackets – the adverts had the right mix of humour, originality and family values to appeal to consumers.

By the time 1990s came around, the company was in good shape, and by the end of the decade when the company went public – leaving the family with around 60% – sales were reaching $353.5 million. However, taking on outside investment brought another set of considerations – shareholders need to monitor the financials and the governance and financial structure needed to be changed – so Gert stepped down as CEO in 1998, passing the reigns to her son. She stayed on as chairwoman, a role she is still in today, aged 90.

'Trying stuff'

The company motto is 'Trying stuff since 1938' and the culture of product development has played a big part in their marketing. In 2010 it launched the OmniHeat range, which keeps athletes warm with reflective linings and thermal layers. In 2013 Omni-Freeze Zero was introduced, a cooling technology that uses absorbent rings to shift moisture away from the fabric. For its autumn/winter 2014 seasons, it revamped the reflective layers in OmniHeat for Turbodown, a down-synthetic mix. "The world is changing, our competitors are getting better – we need to make sure we out-try them," says Tom.

Today the company is a group – owning the Montrail and Sorell outdoor footwear brands, equipment-focused Mountain Hardware and yoga brand PrAna, which it bought in mid-2014. It also set up a Chinese joint-venture to target Asia and invested in membrane technology supplier OutDry in 2010. It keeps up the focus on R&D with athlete collaborations, such as creating the Olympic uniforms for the US, Canada and Russia freestyle ski teams for the Sochi games last January.

After being affected by mild winters in 2012 and 2013, the company is again growing strongly. For the third quarter of 2014, which ended in September, sales increased 29% compared with the year-ago period to a record $675.3 million. Apparel, accessories and equipment sales grew 28% to $549.4 million and footwear sales increased 33% to $125.9 million.

Above-expected revenues for the third consecutive quarter means the group has raised its sales and earnings forecast for the full financial year, which ends in February. Sales are expected to be 22% higher than in 2013, nudging over $2 billion, and profit 33% higher at $127 million.

Tim Boyle said of the results: "Our efforts to deliver innovation, performance and compelling styling through our products are resonating with wholesale customers and, more importantly, with consumers, positioning us to generate double-digit sales growth again in 2015."

Those kind of profits mean Gert can continue her philanthropy. After a meeting with her accountant, she decided that donating on her terms was preferable to those of the tax man. "If you don't take care of what you have, when you're gone somebody is going to take care of it for you," she says. "And I never liked having other people do things for me."

Her original request for anonymity for the Knight Institute donation was driven by a desire to duck out of the limelight. "I've had my face out there a lot of times and I've had some nasty stuff happen," she says, talking of an incident in 2010 when she was held hostage in her home by an armed burglar.

Unbeknownst to him, instead of turning the intruder alarm off as she said she was doing, she hit a silent panic button that alerted local police. He fled, jumping off over a balcony and injuring his leg and was picked up soon after when he was spotted limping down a highway. 'Columbia's One Tough Mother Foils Robber' read the headlines. The intruder got 16 years in prison.

"That was no fun!" says Gert. "You don't mess with little old ladies." Maybe not so soft, after all.