Ron Jon names a new big kahuna, Debra Harvey (BSBA ’76)
The vast enterprise promotes a longtime fashion buyer to president and COO.

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Debbie Harvey spent most of her career buying women's fashion apparel for Tampa Bay area retailers: Maas Brothers, Beall's and HSN. On Wednesday, she rode the waves to president and chief operating officer of Ron Jon Surf Shop.

"It's turned into a wonderful mid-career change for me with a smaller company that's provided a far more diverse experience," said Harvey, 52, who steered the growing surf retailer's merchandise-buying organization for seven years.

It's been a bicoastal odyssey shuttling between condos in Cocoa and downtown St. Petersburg for Harvey and her husband, Richard Lane, who owns InsurTek in Tampa.

Since 1997, Ron Jon grew from a pair of garish surf shops in Cocoa and New Jersey into a sprawling empire of 17 company-owned and licensed stores in three countries, a surf school, a time share resort, a planned surf park in Orlando and four airport terminal outlets including one at Tampa International. Plans for a Cocoa Beach mixed-use project anchored by a hotel, a Ron Jon store and a themed water park, however, fizzled.

The chain was founded in 1959 by Ron DiMenno, a Jersey shore surfer who was advised to get in business when he wanted a custom-made California board. His father told him to buy three boards so he could sell two and get his own free. Once the first shop opened in Long Island Beach, N.J., DiMenno in 1963 pursued better waves near Cape Canaveral, where he opened what's touted as the world's largest surf shop.

The two-story, 52,000-square-foot store is a tourist attraction, complete with its own indoor waterfall, and attracts 1.8-million visitors a year. Ron Jon broadened its surfer lifestyle to the skateboard, skim and body-board crowd, but not more extreme sports like kite boarding.
More than half the chain's sales are of its own store brands, which
Harvey's staff oversees.

DiMenno, who designed the Ron Jon logo that remains star of the top-
selling colored T-shirts, still owns the company. But Ron Jon has
ventured into new territory exploiting the familiar brand name since Ed
Moriarity, a former Walt Disney Co. executive, took over as chief
executive officer a decade ago.

As for Harvey, she's a regular at the big surf shows, learned how to
transform a simple surfer T-shirt into an item of changing fashion and
serves as a board member of the industry trade association
"I grew up in Fort Lauderdale, so I know how to surf," she said, then
fessed up. "I just haven't been out this year."

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