

E

EMPIRE

A LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

Brandy Ann Fiala

LIVING LIFE NOW

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHANE MONAHAN

Brandy Ann Fiala

LIVING LIFE NOW

By: Andrea Van Essen | Photos By: Shane Monahan Photography

Brandy Ann Fiala is a doer.

It's a trait that has carried her through a lifetime of challenging circumstances, both personal and professional.

Brandy, who recently took over ownership of the nearly 100-year-old Eilers Furs, is now one of the region's only furriers: a retailer who sells, repairs and stores fur apparel. It's a career she says she couldn't have anticipated, though she's long been a fan of fashion and fur.

Eilers Furs was founded in Huron, SD in 1927, and Brandy is the second non-family owner in its history — taking the shop over from Leonard and Gail Iwinski, who took it over from the Eilers family in 1991.

"I never thought I'd be doing anything like this in my life," she says of running a luxury business.

Life hasn't exactly been easy for Brandy, and she certainly didn't come from a wealthy background.

Born in Mandan, ND, 80 miles northwest of Bismarck, Brandy grew up on her family's farm and cattle ranch in Hazen, ND until age six. Around that time, her parents divorced, and her mother moved her and her triplet older sisters to Tulsa, OK, to attend seminary. Throughout her youth, Brandy bounced around the country with her mother's ministry career, but after graduating from high school, she moved to Sioux Falls, where she felt closer to her family and roots.

She attended Colorado Technical College in Sioux Falls, earning a bachelor's degree in business and marketing and then got a job working for the Dakota Lions eye and tissue bank. It was a role that felt personal, as her triplet sisters suffered from a variety of health problems, and two required kidney transplants.

After some time though, one of her sisters developed non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and Brandy says she needed a change of scenery to give her a break. In 2010, she moved on to manage the corporate marketing for an HVAC company for several years, and during that time,

her sister passed away and a year later, her house burned down.

After marrying in 2012, her late sister's 11-year-old niece and 14-year-old nephew moved in when Brandy's eldest of her two sons was seven months old. Since then, she has changed jobs several times (including working for the governor's office under Kristi Noem), gotten divorced and become a single mother.

In a way, it's Brandy's hard-earned understanding that life is precious that draws her to luxury items like fur.

Her first experience with fur was at about 20 years old when she moved to Sioux Falls. Having lived for several years in the southern part of the country, she says she wasn't messing around when it came to cold weather.

"I was freezing here, and I needed something that would keep me warm. I knew there was a fur store in Sioux Falls, but I remember thinking I couldn't afford anything," she said.

"So, I went to eBay to get my first fur, a vintage mink, and I had it for years."

Then, she began collecting.

According to Brandy, "Once you go fur, you don't go back." She wears her furs everywhere, from shoveling the sidewalk to a fancy evening out, and says it's the warmest thing you can wear.

"I've always been a shoes and coats girl — I had a zillion coats, all of my mom's from the '70s, my dad's leathers, my sister's coats, all these good old vintages."

But when her house burnt down, she lost everything. Slowly, she had to begin rebuilding her collection.

"I started redoing my fur collection through online shopping, but the quality just wasn't as good," she said.

It was then that she became acquainted with Eilers Furs, as she started bringing in her pieces that were worn





or damaged for repairs. She started shopping there instead of online, and one day, while getting her red fox coat repaired, she got into a long conversation with the owner, Leonard. The topic of his age came up, and Brandy asked about his plans for retirement or succession.

Between her personal experience with her sister's sickness and death and her home burning down, to her professional experience at the eye and tissue bank, as well as working at a senior living community, Brandy knows all too well how fleeting life is.


"I believe in living life now because tomorrow is not promised. Wear your furs. Wear your expensive perfume. If you want a diamond, go buy it. That's what I believe."

But Leonard told her that he had no plans to retire, and if he were to die the next day, the store would die with him.

"I said, 'Oh geez, calm down. I'll do it.' Famous last words."

There was another older gentleman in the store that day who joined their conversation, and Brandy recalls him quipping, "There are three types of people in this world: the doers, the non-doers and the lucky; none of us in this room are really that lucky."



A woman with long, wavy brown hair is sitting on a bar stool at a bar. She is wearing a black dress, a blue cape with a large grey fur hood, and bright pink velvet boots. She is smiling at the camera. The background shows a bar with various bottles and a brick wall.

**"I BELIEVE IN LIVING LIFE NOW
BECAUSE TOMORROW IS NOT
PROMISED. WEAR YOUR FURS.
WEAR YOUR EXPENSIVE PERFUME.
IF YOU WANT A DIAMOND, GO BUY
IT. THAT'S WHAT I BELIEVE."**

-Brandy Ann Fiala



“He was right, I’m not lucky,” she said. “But I am a doer.”

She knew that Leonard hadn’t viewed her offer to take over the store as a serious proposition and that she had a lot to learn about the business. So, the next day she went out and put together what she says was the biggest, best gift basket you’ve ever seen. She included her resume and a card that read, “From one doer to another, I do hope to hear from you soon.”

She waited for 10 days, and finally, Leonard called. They signed a contract, and she spent the next 10 months training under him full-time. In January 2023, she officially took ownership of the store.

Now, a year later, she says running the business is beginning to feel real and normal. She loves introducing people to the magic of wearing fur and says the younger generations are really coming around to it.

“I think it’s about how natural it is — this is just my belief, but I think it’s the spirit of the animal that comes to life and mixes with your aura and energy, as well as your skin tones and your hair color. On the hanger, it’s just a coat, but when you put it on, it comes alive.”

She adds that there’s just something elusive about a gorgeous fur coat.

“You can’t just go anywhere and buy fur. It’s like wearing cubic zirconia your whole life and finally getting a diamond — you feel like you’ve arrived.”

And in many ways, Brandy has arrived.

“It’s been a struggle to get here to this dream,” she said.

“I didn’t have any help or support system going to school. I paid off all my student loans on my own by waitressing and working my way up to corporate jobs, and I think it’s very important to be inspired and self-motivated.”

When she isn’t working hard on her dreams, you can find Brandy spending time with her two kids, shopping for unique clothes and going out in Sioux Falls — always wearing her furs.

She describes herself as a modern-day socialite who loves a good happy hour, whether that’s at a dive bar like The Crow or Top Hat, or somewhere more high-end like Bin 201, Crawford’s or Myrtle’s Fur Vault — a fitting spot for a fur-sporting fashionista like herself.



5 THINGS ABOUT *Brandy Ann*



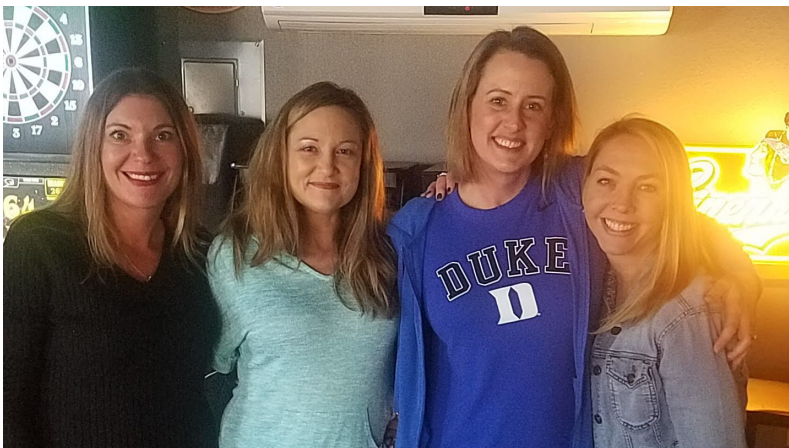
Brandy and her sons, Kristoff and Cason keep busy with soccer, baseball and football activities



Brandy enjoys summer pool parties with her nephew Kyle and boys Kristoff and Cason



Brandy and her sons in Nashville at the Grand Ole Opry on their family adventure, driving from Miami to Sioux Falls in the summer of 2021



Brandy cherishes her 20-year friendships and Pink Ladies dart team "Rabbit Holes Suck" with Jenny Arenas, Kirsten Hartman-Losby and Trisha Reynolds

1 Brandy won the title of Mrs. South Dakota in 2013.

2 Growing up, Brandy played the tuba, clarinet and violin.

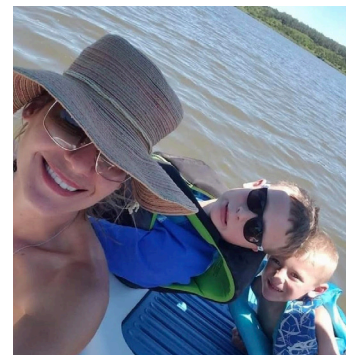
3 In a family of six, Brandy, her mother and sister Shandy are left-handed, and Brandy is the only one with brown eyes; the rest have hazel.

4 Brandy loves old country music; she named her eldest son Kristofferson after Kris Kristofferson. In 2012, he was the only baby born in the U.S. with that name spelled with a K and two Fs.

5 At age three, Brandy learned to ride a horse on her family farm in North Dakota.



Florence Henderson and Brandy hit it off at the 2013 Mrs. America pageant where Henderson hosted, "She was a riot, hilarious and classy at the same time."



Brandy, Kristoff and Cason Fiala enjoy countryside lake life where they reside outside of Sioux Falls on Lake Vermillion