Closed door opens another
Business grad reminisces about success in family's small business

—by Amy Hufford, ’06

In 1901, a small, family-owned clothing store was born in Rochester, Pa., to Salem Markos, a Syrian immigrant.

In 2005, Charlotte Markos-Kann, ’69, and her siblings closed the doors to that same clothing store for the last time in downtown La Crosse.

In an economy where owning a small business can be more than challenging, Markos-Kann and her family always ran a thriving business. At one point, the family owned two other stores in addition to the Pearl Street location, including a shop in Valley View Mall for 15 years.

But Markos-Kann and her siblings were the last generation interested in running a clothing store. So when the time came for them to retire, so came the time for the store to close.

The last day the store was open was bittersweet. “I’m very emotional,” Markos-Kann says. “I cry when I’m happy, when I’m sad…”

When the store closed, she recalls the feeling as being happy sad. “We did this and we were lucky enough to have this successful business, but when you get to be our age, you’re kind of ready for it,” she explains. “There comes a time when you know it’s right.

“I’m proud of the family business and what we were able to accomplish,” she continues. “We just all felt that it was the right time to retire and move on.”

Markos-Kann has no lack of plans for her retirement. She’s got a stack of books she’s been waiting to read, as well as a cottage up north where she and her husband, “Jug,” plan to spend a lot of time relaxing.

“Maybe we’ll see the states,” she says. “Or, go overseas, just take off.”

But clothing store or not, Markos-Kann will always be dedicated to UW-L. “The value of my education helped me in my work and in my life,” she says. “I’m really interested in giving back to the university.”

Markos-Kann is proud to be a chartered member of the Silver Eagles, an organization comprised of 25-year graduates of the business program. “I qualify real big time,” she jokes. She’s also a member of the CBA Advisory Board.

“UW-L helps you grow as a person,” explains Markos-Kann. “It gives you confidence, it gives you self-worth.”

She spent four-and-a-half years attending classes at UW-L, though she could have graduated in four years. The extra semester came as a result of the scattered classes she took as extras to supplement her business degree, including marketing and advertising.

Despite her confession of being shy, Markos-Kann thrives on personal interaction. “I made very dear friends at the store,” she says. She got to know some of her customers so well, in fact, that if too much time passed between visits, she would call just to check up and make sure everything was OK.

And the business kept Markos-Kann on her toes. “You have to stay on top of fashion,” she says. “That’s where the challenge comes in. I had to look forward, and learn to take the trends and run.

“I was my own worst critic,” Markos-Kann continues. At the end of every selling season, Markos would not only monitor her successes, but her failures as well, to see where she could improve in the future.

And the future is what lies before Markos-Kann now. When the doors to Salem Markos and Son closed, the door to her future opened. She’s going to make the most of it.