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## For two Oregon entrepreneurs, the Ducks' perfect season wraps up a banner year

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By **Rachel Bachman, The Oregonian**

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Mark McInnis, special to The Oregonian

Oregonians Ryan Vesalpour (left) and Zach Patterson are the founders of U-Wrap, which sells collegiate-licensed gift wrap. This fall the company branched out into T-shirts, sold online and at the UO Bookstore/The Duck Store.

The turning point of Ryan Vesalpour's and Zach Patterson's fledgling business was waking up in Patterson's Volkswagen Jetta in Las Vegas.

It was spring 2007, and the Portland State and University of Oregon graduates had slept in their suits outside a campus marketing trade show.

The best friends sneaked in, shaved in a bathroom and strode into the convention feeling like a million bucks ... but were greeted with stares. They wore the only formal dress in a sea of casual shirts, and their faces bled from the rough shaves.

Three and a half years later **U-Wrap**, their collegiate-licensed wrapping-paper company, contracts with about 50 colleges and universities thanks in

part to the connections they made in Las Vegas. With increased sales driven by the **Oregon football team's 12-0 season**, Vesalpour and Patterson are giving back in the form of T-shirts for military servicemen and women, and wrapping paper for their families.

"We constantly pinch ourselves," Vesalpour said.

Back in 2007, Vesalpour and Patterson realized no one had licensed collegiate-themed wrapping paper. They won approval from Oregon -- a university employee noted that Nike co-founder Phil Knight started by selling shoes out of his car trunk -- and began handing out samples at tailgate parties.

The idea took off. Someone from Oregon State called and soon licensed U-Wrap, followed by more Northwest schools, as well as Miami and Ohio State and others.

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The enthusiasm of Vesalpour, 28, and Patterson, 29, helped win over customers. Because women do much of the holiday gift-wrapping, many people thought U-Wrap's founders were female. So at first Patterson, who ran cross-country at Bend's Mountain View High, and Vesalpour, who played football at Beaverton High, used a photo of the Golden Girls on the company's MySpace site.

"We were ahead of the Betty White trend," Vesalpour said.

The company expanded to gift bags and began selling at Made in Oregon, Fred Meyer and Walgreen's, but U-Wrap retains an Oregon Ducks flavor. Its T-shirts memorializing "The Pick" each sent \$2 to the Kenny Wheaton Foundation. Another T-shirt, which reads: **"National Forecast/Oregon Reign"** was a hit online and at the UO Bookstore.

Vesalpour got excited inquiries about the shirt from military personnel serving overseas, and decided to send them T-shirts for free. The soldiers were overjoyed; a sergeant serving in Korea said it brought tears to his eyes.

Vesalpour contacted **Operation Homefront/Oregon** and donated 225 more T-shirts to people serving in German, Iraq and Afghanistan, and nearly \$10,000 in Ducks and Beavers wrapping paper.

"I felt like an angel landed in my lap," said Christine Strawn, Homefront's interim chapter president. "He showed up at the right time."

Days ago Vesalpour got a call from Jim Williams of the multi-location UO Bookstore/The Duck Store. Vesalpour said the gesture from Williams, the longtime general manager of the nonprofit group of stores that helped give U-Wrap its start, was like hearing from the President.

Williams, a Vietnam veteran, thanked him. For Vesalpour and U-Wrap, it was a long way from sleeping in a car in Las Vegas.

"I just believe so strongly in relationships," Williams said. "And I believe that if you give, it comes back to you."

-- Rachel Bachman

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