



Mel and Liz Bilbo bring the Christmas spirit to Branson year-round through Kringles Christmas Shop.

HEATHER MOSLEY

# JOY TO THE WORLD

## Kringles Christmas Shop keeps holiday spirit alive in Branson year-round

by *Hanna Ghabhain* · Contributing Writer

The halls are decked year-round at Kringles Christmas Shop in Branson. If co-owner Mel Bilbo had to guess, there are approximately 50,000 ornaments adorning more than 100 trees at the moment.

Can there be too much Christmas, though? As an owner of a store which puts all its business ornaments onto one proverbial tree, Bilbo says no way. In November alone, the shop made more than \$500,000 in sales. Kringles has sold Christmas year-round for the past 32 years, 20 of which were under Bilbo's leadership.

"The interesting thing is that, if it's been open, we've sold Christmas," he says. "It doesn't matter if it's March or July. We open, and it sells Christmas."

### A Christmas story

Bilbo's career began in 1968 when he was hired to work at Six Flags AstroWorld in Houston, Texas. He planned on becoming an architect but switched career plans and began climbing the ranks – going from ride operator to operations supervisor to assistant director of operations by the time he was 22. He later

worked as director of operations for Carowinds in North Carolina, ran theme parks in the Bay Area for the Marriott Corp., spent 17 years with Anheuser-Busch Cos. LLC and was division manager for Disney's indoor theme park experiment DisneyQuest. Bilbo moved to Branson in 1999 as CEO of Herschend Family Entertainment Corp., which owns and operates attractions including Silver Dollar City and Dollywood. Yes, Bilbo has met Dolly Parton – several times. He's also met John Denver, The Judds, Barry Manilow and numerous astronauts.

"It's a blessing and I wouldn't trade it for anything," Bilbo says of his career. "The number of people, the variety of people you meet when it comes to the folks who work with you. The guests, the customers who come through the front door."

Bilbo transitioned out of theme park management in 2003 when he bought Reflections Art Gallery and a bookstore in the Grand Village from Silver Dollar City. He purchased Kringles in 2004 and Mel's Hard Luck Diner in 2005. In 2023, Reflections and the bookstore were combined into Kringles Village Treasures, also located in Grand Village and open year-round as an extension of Kringles

Christmas Shop. It primarily offers collectible items, including Department 56 items. All three businesses operate under the holding company Kriker Tracks LLC, owned by Bilbo and his wife, Liz.

It wasn't too far of a stretch going from theme parks to themed stores, he says: "My background I felt would help immensely in running such a heavily themed environment like a Christmas store."

### Year-round cheer

Donna McLarty is manager and senior buyer at Kringles, where she's worked for 30 years. Alongside manager and designer Michelle McCabe, she ensures the store is filled with the latest trends and traditional favorites. It's both a science and an art. McLarty and McCabe analyze trends from the previous year, make strategic decisions on which items were most lucrative and project future trends by reading journals, talking with industry insiders and listening to customers. Products are purchased from national, international and local brands. Although Kringles sells some items online, the bulk of purchases are in-store. At peak, inventory reaches approximately \$2 million, says Bilbo. It rarely

goes beneath \$1.7 million.

"Because we have been in business so long and know what sells, seldom do we change things," McLarty says. "For the most part, since we have proven our themes work for us, we just improve on them, add on them and always try to get new things."

"Honestly, it's just like a puzzle."

Keeping decor fresh, new and trendy is an ongoing process. Right now, one of the most popular items is a Kansas City Chiefs infinity light. Personalization, as always, is a big deal. McLarty says traditional greens, reds and golds are becoming popular again, although blue and silver color schemes remain trendy.

Kringles sells big-name brands such as Fontanini, Jim Shore Designs Inc. and Christopher Radko. The shop hosts artists on tour, including some who come from overseas. A few weeks ago, a visit from Emanuele Fontanini brought guests from around the nation to Branson.

Although some of Kringles' products come from the United States, a large portion comes from international sellers and artists. Looking into 2025, the retailer anticipates potential impacts from tariffs promised by the incoming Trump administration. Because many of the international countries Kringles purchases from – such as Poland and Switzerland – are not anticipated to receive those tariffs, Bilbo says he is not too worried yet. However, there still is a portion of Kringles' supply purchased from China, which could be impacted.

"I have been told by several companies that they bought containers earlier this year just in case there is an issue for 2025 with getting product over through the shipyards and things like that," McLarty says. "So, you're almost at their mercy, but you've got the individual vendors and hope nothing happens with the tariffs and shipping."

Bilbo is also keeping his eye on staffing trends. Besides positions like McLarty's, most staff are seasonal workers, with ranks increasing during the holiday season. Kringles usually made those hires from seasonal caravans of retired individuals seeking a job while visiting the area or from foreign visa workers. However, those numbers have dropped since COVID, causing Kringles to close one day a week and reduce daily hours. Even so, the holidays go on, Bilbo says. Thirty years has shown that, if the store is open, guests will come.

Bilbo believes the ultimate Christmas gift of Kringles is to be a light of joy and hope all year.

"You have an opportunity to make a person's day and help people through challenges," he says of the shop. "The looks on people's faces are so important to me and getting to share and talk with people." ●

### Kringles Christmas Shop

**Owners:** Mel and Liz Bilbo  
**Founded:** 1993  
**Address:** 2800 W. 76 Country Blvd., Branson  
**Phone:** 417-337-5426  
**Web:** KringlesBranson.com  
**Email:** kringleschristmasstore@gmail.com  
**Services/Products:** Christmas decor and specialty items  
**Revenue:** Would not disclose  
**Employees:** 15 during the Christmas season; minimum of 3 in off-season