

Sewing Success

Marketing device meets fashion statement with crafty Flashbags



All smiles: Laura Cheney and Ali Marchildon are on a roll with Flashbags.

By MICHELLE EDELBAUM
Photographed by DARIA BISHOP

ALI MARCHILDON KNEW MAKING handbags could be more than a hobby when strangers kept stopping her on the street in Vermont to ask about her homemade purses. Rather than canvas or leather, her boxy totes showcased personal photographs or artist's prints and featured clear plastic tubing as straps.

"It was so consistent, it was hard to ignore," said Marchildon. "But I didn't want to start a business alone."

Marchildon, who had moved to Vermont from Hawaii in 2005, had struck up a friendship with Laura Cheney of Burlington. Both women shared a love of sewing, and both were at a turning point in their lives: Cheney had quit her job as a schoolteacher in Brandon and was hoping to pursue her passion for crafts, and Marchildon, an art teacher, was stalled in getting a job in Vermont until she could obtain a state teaching certificate.

The pair decided the time was right to try to turn their hobby into a business.

The next step was to take the Women's Small Business Program offered by Mercy Connections, a nonprofit educational organization in Burlington. By 2006, with just a single sewing machine and a makeshift office set up in the dining room of Marchildon's

Burlington home, Flashbags was finally launched.

The women originally conceived of their products as custom fashion pieces. Until last year, that is, when the company landed its first major client, PlayPumps International, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., that provides access to clean drinking water in Africa with merry-go-round style water pumps.

PlayPumps asked Flashbags to create a handbag using pictures of children playing on the pumps. It was an "Ah ha!" moment for the fledgling business owners. They realized the products were a marketing tool, a bag-sized billboard that sparked conversations so people could talk about their company or charity.

"You can't help but ask about the bright photos of kids on the bags," said Dale Jones, PlayPumps chief executive officer. "The bags are perfect conversation starters."

This new insight opened Marchildon and Cheney's horizons beyond individual customers and pointed them in a new business direction. Soon their bags were helping spread the word for Washington, D.C.-based organizations Women for Women International and The Case Foundation (which presented a bag to first lady Laura Bush).



What is a Flashbag?

- A Flashbag is a handmade purse or accessory such as a wallet, checkbook holder or wine tote from Flashbags, a company located in Winooski. Instead of leather or canvas, the bag is made of a laminated poster or photocopy, which is wrapped around several sheets of newsprint that provide support. The materials are sewn together and covered with decorative stitching. To make a shoulder bag, clear plastic tubing is added as straps.
- Flashbags products range in size from wallets to large tote bags, and cost \$24-\$88. Information and ordering at (802) 999-8981 or www.flashbagsonline.com.





At work in the Flashbags studio, located in the historic Champlain Mill in Winooski

MADE IN VERMONT

The company also attracted museums — such as DAR Museum in Washington, D.C., Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, and Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs, Miss. — who wanted Flashbags featuring images from their collections. In Vermont, the pair crafted messenger bags out of old exhibit posters for the ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center on the Burlington waterfront.

But it is a successful partnership with The Boston Globe that expanded Flashbags' applications into the media realm. The Boston Globe licensed a reproduction of an edition featuring the Boston Red Sox World Series win for use on tote bags.

Toby Leith, content licensing manager for The Boston Globe, called the product a unique combination of branding and licensing. "We've put page reproductions on nightlights, onesies, granite," said Leith. "I don't

know what it is about an accessory like a women's handbag, but they sell the heck out of them."

As Flashbags has become more successful, it's grown too. The pair now has several employees and operates in a spacious office in Winooski's historic Champlain Mill. Cheney said they're committed to staying in Vermont and are firm on maintaining the quality and style of their bag — no canvas or vinyl stand-ins manufactured abroad.

"We love Vermont and Burlington has been a really great place for us to start this business. Because of what we're manufacturing, it's difficult to outsource any piece of the process," Marchildon said. "We want to maintain the quality of the product and are shooting for a higher end market . . . There's power behind things that are made in Vermont and that's a useful marketing tool for us. It's already established and we can plug into that." 🌿



Purses on Parade

More than 40 Flashbags are part of "Purse-onality: Handbags with Attitude," an exhibit of unusually shaped artistic accessories crafted of innovative recycled materials on view at Shelburne Museum through Oct. 26. www.shelburnemuseum.org or 985-3346.