

Fabricating a business

The mothers-turned-entrepreneurs
behind MY Oilcloth, Inc.

By Susan Johnston



IT BEGAN AT A PTO MEETING. Michele Sommer and Yvette Yelardy got involved in the Brookline Early Education PTO through a mutual friend and discovered that they had a similar "can do" attitude and classic fashion sense. Yelardy had been playing with oilcloth fabric for several months, experimenting with tablecloths and other items that she hoped to eventually turn into a business.

When the two ran into each other in the spring of 2006 at the Brookline Village Starbucks, Sommer invited Yelardy to look at her designs. Within 20 minutes, she had a new business partner who shared her vision for fashionable, yet functional oilcloth bags. "It was an instant, high-energy brainstorm session," Sommer said.

"I've always loved oilcloth, but no one quite understood the allure of it," said Yelardy. Since she had previously worked for retailers including Macy's, Lord & Taylor and Henri Bendel, she called in a few favors and found a professional seamstress to help create prototypes. Sommer also brought a strong business background to the table, having worked for Price Waterhouse Coopers for 18 years. She had also grown up sewing her own clothes and slipcovers for fun. Thus, the pair became MY Oilcloth (the M is for Michele and the Y is for Yvette).

In November 2006, Yelardy and Sommer hosted a private launch party at a friend's home, and their entire stock of 600 bags sold out almost immediately. "Wow, we're on to something," Yelardy realized.

The two began looking for local distributors and decided to scope out Charles



Street in Beacon Hill. In the first store they entered, Blackstone's, two women approached them and asked where they bought their bags. The owner quickly agreed to stock their handbags, and, at the rate they are selling, keeping up with the demand has been a challenge for MY Oilcloth.

They had purchased all of the oilcloth fabric they could find in the design they wanted to distribute, but unfortunately the supply had run out, so they eventually had custom

fabric made in Korea.

The pair had scoured fabric stores all over and Sommer's friends even sent samples from Europe, but nothing quite fit their vision of a "supple luxury oilcloth." They sought a material that was not only soft and durable, but also water-repellent.

Currently the line features six bags available in five different patterns, ranging in price from \$38 for a simple wristlet to \$158 for a convertible or wide tote.

The 2008 line will go on sale this December. The new line features eight bags available in five brightly colored custom patterns, all of which are lined in their signature tangerine fabric.

To develop the new line, Sommer and Yelardy traveled to Korea, where the fabrics are made, and to China, where the bags are actually sewn. "Everybody's between 18 and 45, and there's plenty of space. Shanghai is much more advanced than many people realize," said Sommer.

The duo also went to New York City's Jacob Javits Convention Center to show their bags at AccessoriesTheShow, an accessories trade show. "That was a big deal for us," said Yelardy. They hope to roll out national distribution next spring, and with customers carrying their bags on planes, vacations and around town, they already have brand awareness in other markets.

According to Sommer, a friend brought an oilcloth bag to a store in Arizona and the owner has been in touch about stocking the bag in her store. The bags are currently available at several area stores, including Velvet Ribbon Boutique in Brookline's Washington Square and Blackstone's in Beacon Hill.

Both women are amazed by the support they've received from the community and from their families. Sommer has three boys ages seven, nine and 10, and Yelardy has a boy and a girl ages seven and nine. "Everybody has stepped up to help," said Yelardy, who pointed out she went from being a stay-at-home mom to an entrepreneur virtually overnight.

Through friends and family contacts, MY Oilcloth has found photographers, web designers and even fellow entrepreneurs to share their experiences and help out.

Sommer mused that, "when you're sitting across from someone on the soccer field or at a school play, you don't realize the variety of skills and experience around you. There's a lot of goodwill in our community, and people are offering to help us because they want to be part of that success." ▲