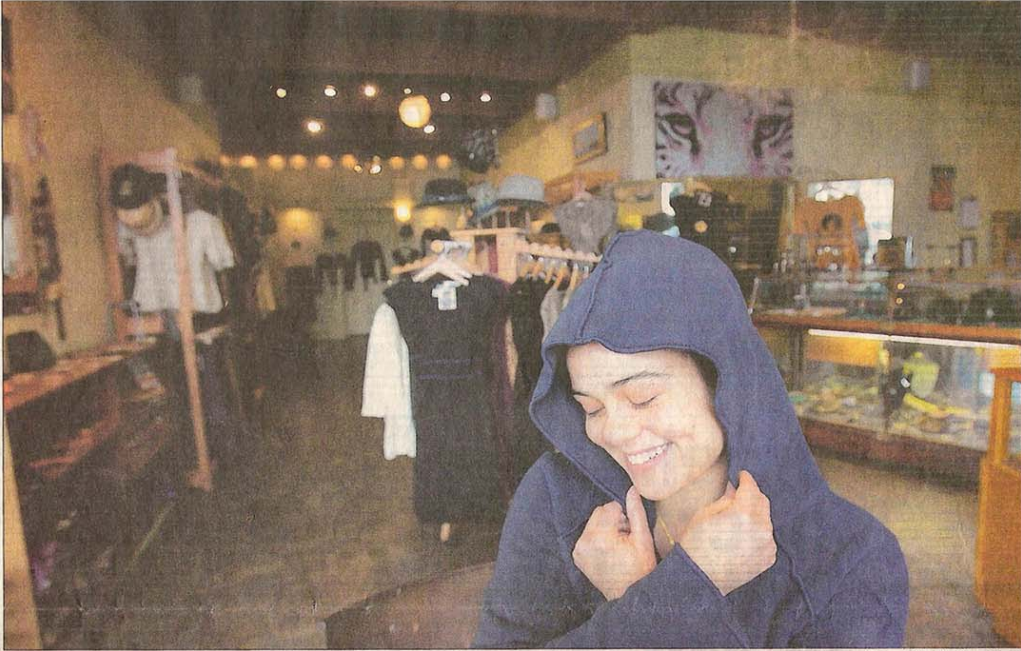


The Register-Guard



AMANDA SMITH/The Register-Guard

Mira Fannin snuggles into the warmth of her Eco-Fleece wraparound hoodie in her Sweet Skins Eco Boutique store in the Whiteaker neighborhood. Fannin began making clothing and selling it at the Saturday Market five years ago.

Success suits her well

A designer of eco-friendly clothing grows from a small booth at the Saturday Market into her own shop

By JOE MOSLEY
The Register-Guard

Her first customers' reactions were all the validation Mira Fannin needed. It was 2004, and she was a new vendor at Eugene's Saturday Market, selling the clothing she had designed and sewn, from a 4-foot-by-4-foot booth.

"When you start out at the Saturday Market, you have a tiny little space, and I had women undressing and trying on things on the sidewalk," Fannin says. "So I said, 'I think I'm onto something.'"

Her Sweet Skins Organic Apparel remains a small enterprise, but has grown in various directions in the five years since Fannin's modest start.

Early on, Fannin got into online sales (www.sweetskins.com), which continue to account for about half of her business. Then she got into wholesaling — and now has her clothing in 18 boutiques across the country.

She made the move this year into bricks-and-mortar retailing, opening a couple of months ago in the Eighth Avenue Plaza — a small strip mall at Eighth Avenue and Blair Boulevard, in west Eugene.

"It just kind of happened," Fannin says. "It was my friend's shop (previously), and I had my stuff on consignment. But it was



SWEET SKINS ECO BOUTIQUE

Where: 782
Blair Blvd.,
Eugene

When: Open
from 11 a.m.
to 6 p.m.,
Monday through
Saturday

Who: Business
owner Mira
Fannin got her
start at Eugene's
Saturday Market

Web: www.
sweetskins.com

mostly my stuff that was selling."

The shop — formerly known as Better Yet — is now Sweet Skins Eco Boutique. It carries Fannin's clothing lines exclusively, along with accessories from Livity Outernational and jewelry from local designers.

The Sweet Skins inventory ranges from "Eco-Fleece" wraparound hoodies (the winter-time best-seller) to over-the-knee culottes (the summertime best-seller). Fannin, who is 36, also produces tops, skirts, dresses, pants and even underwear.

"The underwear I do primarily because I

don't like waste," she says. "I use my scraps. And smaller scraps, I donate to other artists."

All Sweet Skins clothing is made with environmentally friendly fabric, from eco-fleece (made from recycled plastic pop bottles) to hemp/cotton blends.

Retail prices range from \$16 for Sweet Skins panties to \$140 for a hemp denim skirt. Most items sell in the \$60 to \$70 range.

Kim Still, promotions manager at the Saturday Market, says it was obvious from early

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Skins: Clothing designer's business grew largely through word-of-mouth marketing

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on that Fannin would do well with her clothing designs.

"Mira's stuff has always been really popular at the Market," Still says. "You can tell, because you see people wearing it — that's an easy way to tell."

The Saturday Market has served as an incubator for several local businesses, an important role as new entrepreneurs seek venues for their

products, Still says. "They get instant feedback, which is the thing that's most helpful to people — besides the cash, of course," she says. "If something doesn't work, you hear about it right away, and that really helps you get your product aligned with the times."

"We love it when people grow their business enough from the base of Saturday Market to start a store. That's so cool, it's what we're here

for." Fannin intends to remain at the Saturday Market for the foreseeable future — but in a standard, 8-foot-by-8-foot booth. She'll be sharing the space this year with her 17-year-old daughter, who has a line of T-shirts with her original illustrations.

Fannin also takes her clothing to festivals and other events from Seattle to central California. It was word-of-mouth marketing from those

types of engagements that led her into both online sales and wholesaling her products to other boutiques.

"I've never done trade shows, or anything like that," she says. "It was really just (boutique owners) contacting me and asking if I did wholesale. And that's when I started getting help with a little sewing."

Fannin first contracted with a free-lance seamstress to help sew her designs. The

"sew house" in a converted garage now has four women sewing Fannin's clothing lines, along with those of a couple of other local designers.

On the production end of her business, Fannin has learned to sew just 10 or 20 items at a time of new and unproven designs, while she and her contract seamstresses may knock off as many as a couple of hundred items at a time from her best-selling lines.

The new Sweet Skins Eco Boutique now serves as a storage space for Fannin's inventory, as well as a retail outlet.

Fannin says she's not sure what her total costs were in converting the storefront to her own space. But the effort was made easier by the fact that her business is similar to the one it replaced, she says.

"There was some expense, but not as much as there would have been if I'd started from scratch," she says.