

designing success: sweet skins:

Mira Fannin stitches together an entrepreneurial spirit and sustainable materials into a healthy and organic brand.



TOP: Mira Fannin shows some clothing samples she cut and designed for Sweet Skins. Fannin says that she prefers organic and clean cut design clothes that can be both casual and dressy.

BOTTOM: Mira Fannin is busy with her one-year-old son Ramses. Fannin says, "My day revolves around him." Fannin brings Ramses to Sweet Skins and her warehouse while she works on new clothing design or production.

A 3,500 square-foot warehouse in the Whitaker neighborhood, one of the most buzzing areas of Eugene, Oregon, still looks quite empty. While a lonely toy truck seems to have been left behind on the floor, suggesting the presence of a baby, a corkboard covered with pictures of women in colorful outfits grabs the attention of all who enter the warehouse.

In the middle of the space, a woman is hunched over a table drowning in sketches of fashion patterns. After turning on soothing music, Mira Fannin buries herself back in her latest Sweet Skins clothing designs.

It is new for Fannin to have such a big place to live out her passion. When she started her clothing line in Eugene less than 10 years ago, she was designing and creating clothes in her garage and selling them at the Saturday Market in downtown Eugene. Back then, customers had to use the sidewalk outside her closet-sized booth as a fitting room.

"She was a single mom, starting out of this small room. It's amazing to see how far she came," says Rasia Santiago, a friend Fannin. Being a mother has influenced the designer's life in many ways. When she was 11 years old, she made her own dolls and their clothing. It was then when she decided to become a fashion designer, but after getting married and becoming a mother, the young woman had to put her plans aside for a while.

"Suddenly I was like, wait, what am I doing with my life?" says Fannin. From that point on, she decided to start living by her own means. "I didn't go to design school. Just skipped it," she says, laughing. This self-educated background, as well as a childhood spent in Thailand, influenced Fannin's style and her focus on simplicity in design. "Sometimes a lot of designers are making all those great ideas that some people can wear, but not everybody," says Fannin.

Despite her simple style, Fannin is a perfectionist. Finding inspiration in her everyday life or in thrift store items, she begins her creative process by creating sketches and patterns that soon become working samples of future clothing pieces. She often goes back over her work about a hundred times. "I always try to



ABOVE: Mira Fannin sketches an outline for men's pants that she plans to put in production. Sweet Skins is a local organic apparel store located on 782 Blair Blvd, Eugene, OR. All clothes at Sweet Skins are designed by Fannin and handmade locally by women.

look for the perfect piece: the perfect leggings, the perfect yoga pants, or the perfect T-shirt," explains Fannin, "Women can get their favorite items and then can wear them every day."

Now a mother of four, her youngest being an adorable one-year-old, Fannin has found a way to successfully balance many aspects of her life. The positive reputation she gained at the quirky Saturday Market helped her open her current store, Sweet Skins, located on Blair Boulevard in the Whitaker neighborhood in West Eugene. Now, Sweet Skins' success goes beyond the boundaries of the town, as Fannin sells her items online and wholesale throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Beyond trendy clothing, Fannin has created a business that is both environmentally and socially conscious.

Instead of using polyester, Fannin uses fabrics like eco-fleece, hemp, organic cotton, and wool for their low-impact processing, superior texture, and quality. She also uses low-impact dyes and recycled materials. Initially, Fannin's interest in organic materials came from her mother's education, but coming to a green town like Eugene made producing environmentally sustainable apparel the obvious choice. Fannin's motto is to keep her waste to a minimum by recycling or donating her left-over fabric to schools or use them for patchwork projects.

Being green is only one part of her business practice. According to Fannin, maintaining a responsible company also means keeping ethics in relationships. "[It's about] trying to have a positive impact on everybody and everything touched by the business," she says. "From those

making, sewing, and buying the fabrics, rather than leaving wreckage behind."

By this philosophy, keeping Sweet Skins local is as important as keeping the business green. Thus, to produce the high quantity of pieces she needs nowadays, Fannin works with women from a local sewing shop who she can rely on during weekends in case of emergencies.

Despite dedicating the majority of her time to her business, Fannin's communicable and social demeanor is striking. "She is like a people-magnet," says her friend and a Sweet Skins shopkeeper, Paula Georgetown. Most of Fannin's

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friends have become involved with Sweet Skins. Paula, who manages the merchandise and website orders, first met Fannin 20 years ago, and the two remain close friends.

It was in Georgetown's shop, known at the time as "Better Yet", where Fannin began selling her creations before starting her own business. "She is a very genuine person, and it comes across in the way the business is run, like a Sweet Skins family," says Santiago, who also used to work for Fannin as an assistant, model, cashier, and salesperson. After working with her friend for many years, Georgetown is happy for Fannin and her success. "A lot of artists are not so good with business, but she is," she says. "I think she has a unique combo."

Keeping close relationships with her customers has been key to Fannin's success.

Customers have been following her blog, "Into Sweet Skins," for many years. Regularly updated with Sweet Skins content, the blog provides transparency to her designs, products, and methods. "I think more and more people want to know that their money goes to a place they feel good about," says Fannin.

Her followers will soon be hearing about many new plans for Sweet Skins. The designer has always had a desire to launch a denim and a shoe line, as well as a line for men, but she put them off after the birth of her baby. "It's just a matter of how much time I have in the day," says the designer. Fannin would like to get the warehouse functioning first, in order to get the sewing shop's employees working directly for her. She is waiting for the right time. "I am very cautious, and I just want to keep it growing one step at a time."

Embracing her passion and lifestyle with her business, Fannin feels proud and confident about the work she does. She sees Sweet Skins as a model for younger generations to chase their own dream. "I think the idea of a 'big business' as it's usually understood, is from the old world and is crumbling," says Fannin. "People now leave school and are ready to start their own venture and find creative ways of living life. I want to show them that it's possible." ♀

- ASIA BALLUFFIER



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