



## Lynn women create cutting-edge bags from recycled newspapers

By Maureen Mullen

Globe Correspondent / January 26, 2012

For Michelle Kane, it's one of the best parts of her job. A woman at a nursing home in Needham contacted Kane, saying she had been saving newspaper articles of historic events for more than 40 years. The woman was afraid the same fate might befall her collection as that of a neighbor's: thrown out after her passing.

When Kane and Kathy Cormier "went to see her in the nursing home, she was so happy to know that we were going to do something wonderful and rewarding with her papers," Kane said. "It's the stories like that which make us smile and be happy that we can make . . . historic events live on and on."

Kane is the director of design operations for Couture Planet in Lynn.

The company is the brainchild of Connie Carman, who is manager of the hotel store at the Fairmont Copley Plaza in Boston.

"Fairmont pioneered the green movement in the hotel industry," Carman said. "I joined the green team at the hotel, and saw all the newspapers pile up."

Carman initially came up with an idea for a recycling bin for hotel rooms, and developed a prototype.

While her idea was not adopted by the Fairmont, it evolved into a vision to make bags - pocketbooks, wallets, totes - from recycled newspapers, with their original content incorporated in the design. Couture Planet was born.

"I really started it as a hobby, and the response was so sensational and overwhelming that I just had to continue it," Carman said. "I brought on partners, and every year since I've been in business we've either doubled or triples our sales."

"It's all word of mouth. We don't have a sales team out there. [It's just] people seeing it in my shop at the hotel and then taking it back to their communities," she said. "So it's really amazing the way things have worked."

Carman and Kane, both natives of Buffalo who live in Swampscott, met through their children's athletic events.

What started with Carman working odd hours in the attic of her home has expanded to Couture Planet's office and manufacturing space at the Lydia Pinkham Building in downtown Lynn. Carman still works for the Fairmont, while squeezing in hours for Couture Planet.

The company has made commitments to offering products completely made in America, and, more specifically, made in Massachusetts. Everything except the stitching - done through a subcontractor in Central Massachusetts - is done in Lynn.

"People say to us all the time, 'These could be made for pennies in China,' " Carman said. "Yeah, of course they could be. But that is not why we started this company, and we just can't sell out like that. Basically, we want to be a household name. That's really what we want to do."

"We want people all over the globe to know about Couture Planet and what we're doing, that we're doing our small little part in making our world a better place."

The company, staffed entirely by women, also has made a commitment to the local community. Helped by a grant from the city, it employs two seniors from Lynn English High School in what started out as summer jobs and has expanded into year-round part-time work.

"It's been a great help for us," said Kane. "It gives a great sense of community for us working with these girls. There's

a lot of good positives.”

While Couture Planet gets recycled newspapers from friends and coffee shops, the large bulk comes from the Fairmont hotel.

“It’s important to know that we use post-consumer newspaper,” Carman said. “We don’t go out and buy any newspaper. We only use recycled newspaper.”

The process starts with combing through old papers to find a story that’s an appealing visual. That job usually falls to Cormier, a self-described “newspaper junkie.”

From there, the newspaper clipping is framed, laminated with a cold press, layered for stability, then sent to the stitcher. A handbag usually uses about 30 to 40 newspaper pages. Because bags are usually done in bulk, orders takes a couple of weeks to complete.

It was one such order that gave Couture Planet one of its most memorable reactions. The company had just completed an order for the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem in connection with an exhibition featuring fashion icon Iris Apfel.

Carman said she was at the shop in Salem, “just taking a look to see what was going on, and Iris herself walked in. And she went nuts over the bags. She actually bought out the first collection,” all 75 bags, Carman said. “So we had to fly back to Lynn and start a second collection.

“I guess she gave them to all of her friends and co-workers. But things like that are just so much fun and very rewarding.”

The company learned from its early days to be prepared for big events.

From the response to the Red Sox winning the World Series in 2007, shortly after the company’s inception, Carman knew to be prepared when the Boston Bruins captured the Stanley Cup last year (200 Bruins bags sold and still counting). The holiday season was a whirlwind, with about 500 bags made and shipped between Nov. 15 and Dec. 31.

The bags, which retail for between \$38 and \$80 - depending on size - can be purchased at retail locations in 14 states, or online at [www.mycoutureplanet.com](http://www.mycoutureplanet.com).

Some orders are one of a kind.

“A woman once sent me a folder full of so many little things that she cut out,” Kane said. “It was for her future daughter-in-law, and we had to make it into a bag. It was all her daughter-in-law’s favorite places: where she grew up, where she went grocery shopping, where they got engaged, all these different things.

“It was really quite a feat to get that together and make it look really good, but it actually turned out quite nice,” she said.

“We get some e-mails saying, ‘It brought tears to my eyes,’ ” Carman said. “There’s just such an emotional reaction to the bags. It’s just incredible.”

For the woman who lives in the Needham nursing home, they have a special product in the works.

“We plan on doing a very special collection” with her old newspapers, “due to their age and how fragile they are,” Kane said. “We may donate them to a charity event or something extraordinary.”

The woman “only wants a bag with animals on it, which is in production,” Kane said. “She is an avid dog lover, and has a collection of stuffed animals.”

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