

Business

Getting Hip

New line of purses offer convenience, powerful message

by Alicia B. Smith

Many women would describe their purse as an abyss. The fashion accessory has been a part of women's wardrobes for centuries, but finding one that is convenient is almost impossible.

Too small, it may look nice, but it does not carry the essentials. Too big and it carries too many "essentials" and requires great effort to find any of them.

A group of sisters understands.

When Sandy Christiano lost her purse and complained to her sisters, the four decided there had to be a better way. A better way that was not a fanny pack.

What Kenya D'Agustino, Ladene Paulino, Raylene D'Agustino and Sandy Christiano came up with was the Hip Purse.

Forget the bulky strapped-on predecessor (fanny pack). The Hip Purse is a sleeker design that clips on to a belt and holds just what women need to keep their hands free.

"It does make your life easier," testified one of the company's founders, Kenya D'Agustino.

She went on a trip to Block Island with her Hip Purse and it made the trip that much better.

The prototype was developed with a piece of cloth and a curtain hanger, said Ms. D'Agustino of Glastonbury.

Ladene Paulino of Rocky Hill is considered the fashionista in the family, as fashion has always been a large part of her life.

She took charge of finding a design that would not only look great, but be totally functional as well.

Since then the sisters have streamlined the design, found a manufacturer overseas and have begun to test market their product.

They have sold the Hip Purse at fairs and other events and so far the feedback has been good.

"We want to keep it fashionable," Ms. D'Agustino said. "It's made for the essentials."

The purses can attach to a belt at the waist with a patented clip and each one comes with a strap that can be used to secure the purse around the waist or allow the owner to hang the purse from her shoulder in a more traditional manner.

The purses run in size from five inches wide to four inches tall, with a few larger or smaller sizes available, depending on for what the purse is being used.

The "Day Tripper" comes in tan or black and has a flap and magnetic closure.

The "Escape" is available in red or black patent leather and is best for dressier occasions.

Other options include the "Getaway," the "Journey" and the "Venture."

While the Hip Purse can be ordered on line (www.HipPurse.com), it is also available at Finula's Boutique in Avon and a few stores in New York.

Ms. Paulino is running the business out of her home and said she and her sisters began the project two years ago.

The women each bring specific backgrounds to the business: Kenya D'Agustino has a background in marketing, Ms. Paulino's is in fashion, Ms. Christiano is the designer and Raylene D'Agustino has experience in the retail business.

"We just kind of joined forces and brought it to life," said Kenya D'Agustino of her family.

Working with family can be trying, but not for these sisters. They are all close in age, which helps. "We had our disagreements, (but) I find it very enjoyable and fun," said Ms. Paulino.

The one ingredient that helps the sisters work together is the fact that they trust one another. "Right now it's all in the family," Ms. Paulino said, adding that their mother, Gerry Hyjek, does the bookkeeping for the business.

The purses, which are handy, also have another purpose. As part of the collection, Hip Purse also offers a special line called "Hands-Off." This is geared toward young girls and offers a message of power.

"I think fashion is a powerful vehicle," Kenya D'Agustino said.

When the sisters were brainstorming ideas on how to have fun with their purses and children, the concept of empowering young girls came up. She brainstormed on her own and developed the idea with the hope of getting "a message to a young and powerful age group."

The fashion industry tends to send a message to women and it's not always the right message, she said. Young girls are often influenced by it. Fashion models on the runways tend to be seriously underweight and hemlines get shorter and shorter.

The Hip Purse in the Hands-Off collection come with the Hands-Off logo (two hands with the thumbs overlapping to form a heart).



Kenya D'Agustino models a Hip Purse that she and her sisters developed to make life easier for women.

When Kenya D'Agustino learned that one in three females in high school have been or will be in an abusive relationship, it startled her.

As did other statistics from the National Domestic Violence Organization, such as that one in five female high school students report being physically or sexually abused by someone they are dating.

The Hands-Off purses remind young girls of the importance of taking care of themselves and serve as a reminder that they have the power to protect themselves. Each purse comes with a "certificate of strength" that the owner can sign and hang up on the wall at home. There is also a "power badge"

The badge states: "I pledge to protect my body and not let anyone treat me badly in any manner. I will always love myself and say no or stop to any type of harmful behavior. I will tell an adult I trust if someone is hurting me physically or emotionally."

"I have courage and strength within and I can always protect myself. I'm a very special, important person and there is no other person more important than me. I will tell anyone that is hurting me ... hands off."

"I think getting them young is the thing," Kenya D'Agustino said.

A percentage of the proceeds from the Hands-Off collection goes toward the Children's Home (a center for children and their families) and the Women's Center and Shelter in Greater Pittsburgh, a place also supported by singer Christina Aguilera, herself a victim of domestic violence when she was a child. **RHL**

As seen in

Rocky Hill

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