



DESIGNED TO GROW

BY BRIAN SCHWARTZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB MAYER

Lexy Funk '91 never imagined that she would find an outlet for her artistic creativity in the clothing industry, but New York shoppers are glad she did.

In a sleepy but resurgent neighborhood in Brooklyn, in a granitic old building at the end of a residential street, the employees of a local clothing company are busy making designs. Thanks to a recent snow, the sidewalks outside are slushy and cold, but inside the designers are thinking about spring and summer, warmer seasons, lighter fabrics. Inspiration is all around them. The company's offices are in a high-ceilinged warehouse space filled with freestanding racks of clothing; the many textures and hues of the hanging skirts, sweatshirts, and blouses belie the age of the chipping gray-painted floors.

Bookcases stacked with oversized art tomes and tables piled with magazines from around the world make the open office seem part factory, part fashion archive, part museum of design. Then there are the employees themselves, young people who sit at their desks in winter scarves as they discuss computer images of breezy sleeveless tops. The conversations they are having will almost certainly influence what New Yorkers wear in the months to come; they are, after all, planning next season's lineup for Brooklyn Industries.

Founded in 1997 by Wesleyan alumna Lexy Funk '91 and her partner, Vahap Avsar, Brooklyn Industries has grown from a small operation specializing in bags made of salvaged vinyl to a clothing brand that puts out everything from winter coats to colorful T-shirts. The Brooklyn Industries logo, a yellow, black, and maroon rendering of the Manhattan skyline viewed from a Brooklyn rooftop, is now a common sight in fashionable neighborhoods around New York City, splashed across shopping bags and sewn in miniature on purses, blue-jeans, and messenger bags. The company also has seven stores in Brooklyn and Manhattan—the first opened in 2001—and co-founders Funk and Avsar hope to continue expanding the business.

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Funk, whose face is dotted with youthful freckles, is thoughtful and articulate as she retraces the path that led her from the art world to the clothing business. She makes it clear that the liberal education she received at Wesleyan prepared her for life as both a creative thinker and a businesswoman, although she didn't envision herself as an entrepreneur when she was in college. "I studied studio art, photography, a lot of history," Funk recalls. "History gives you a sense of place. I love reading texts from other periods—industrial history, intellectual history. I'm fascinated by things like how people lived and what they ate at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution."

She adds, "The thought process Wesleyan gives you



enables you to start a factory if you want to. You can figure it out—you have the tools to do it."

Funk confesses that she was "anti-corporate, anti-business" when she came out of Wesleyan—"I wanted to change the world through art"—but as the years passed, clothing design allowed her to bridge the gap between her artwork and her need for a day job. When she made the leap from graphic design and video art to co-founder of a business, she considered the example of her father, Peter Funk '61, who has worked in film, television distribution, and telecommunications. "My father was an entrepreneur, my main role model, traveling the world, starting things," she says. "I saw him doing business in a creative way, engaged, open. An open thinker."

With Brooklyn Industries, Funk has tried to bring her father's entrepreneurial openness into her own business practices. She sees herself as one of her company's concept people—an idea generator—and she encourages the brand's designers to read books about artists and cultural movements in order to "coalesce people around certain ideas." She and Avsar want the company's aesthetic conversation to include not only their in-house designers, but their customers and retail store employees. "Our brand is about our surroundings," Funk insists.

Avsar adds, "We're community-based—very interactive with our customers and our community. We're not designing from some sterile campus somewhere."

Their business philosophy, in addition to being community-oriented, is also environmentally friendly: for example, they constructed a portion of their store in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood using scraps of leftover wood from a renewable forest in Finland. Funk believes customers are willing to pay more for a brand that values creativity and sustainability, and so far her instincts about such matters seem downright oracular.

In the past three years, Brooklyn Industries has grown 365 percent, earning it a Small Business Award from Crain's New York Business and a spot on the Inc. 500, which profiles the 500 fastest growing companies in America. The company and its products have been featured in *Newsweek*, the *Village Voice*, *Time Out New York*, the *New York Times*, and in a number of specialty magazines. The bottom line—literally—is that Brooklyn Industries, the bohemian brainchild of two visual artists, is earning about \$7.2 million in annual revenue.

Funk and Avsar—the president and creative director



of Brooklyn Industries, respectively—are partners in life as well as work. They met at an artists' retreat in 1995, and in addition to building a clothing brand together, they are raising a family. Indeed, the brand and the family have both expanded dramatically in the past several years, which has presented its share of challenges.

In 1997, Funk and Avsar set up a factory in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and began to make bags; shortly after that Funk developed a new set of aspirations. "I really wanted to have kids," she says. "I was in my late 20s, suddenly thinking, 'Must have baby'... It's ironic that the business took off as we had children. I remember continuing to work through both pregnancies." They now live with their two young sons in a neighbor-



hood not far from the current Brooklyn Industries office and design center in Clinton Hill.

Avsar, who handcrafted the company's first vinyl bag a decade ago, explained how the technology behind Brooklyn Industries clothes and accessories has evolved. These days, clothing concepts are drawn on a computer. Specifications for these computer-generated designs are sent to a factory, and the factory sends back samples of clothes. Avsar, Funk, and their company's four clothing designers can go back and forth with the factory this way for between two and eight weeks before a particular item meets Brooklyn Industries' standards and is ready to be manufactured, marketed, and sold.

A very few items are handmade at the Brooklyn headquarters by seamstresses, but most everything else is put together overseas or in other parts of the United States. (Because the company offers a lifetime guarantee on its bags, there is always a certain amount of repair work going on at the Brooklyn office as well.)

According to Funk, product is flying in from various factories all the time: Brooklyn Industries offers 10 to 20 (and sometimes as many as 40) new styles every week, from bags and accessories to gloves and hats. There are also eight new T-shirt designs—four for women and four for men—every seven days or so.

And who's buying?

"We have a very diverse customer base because of our neighborhood stores," Funk says. "We know from surveys that the majority of our customers are in their late 20s; they tend to be creative people in some way, very well educated. Our customers shop at tons of different places, from Target to Marc Jacobs, so we look at other retailers obsessively—what makes them good, what doesn't. We want to be a really good company."

Brian Schwartz is a freelance writer and writing teacher living in Brooklyn who publishes in newspapers, journals and The Modern Spectator, a Web site that examines the role of sports in American culture.

Left: Scenes from a Wesleyan GOLD (graduates of the last decade) reception at Brooklyn Industries' new store in Chelsea. **Right:** Lexy Funk and her partner, Vahap Avsar.

