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Shoe fashionistas are high stepping to Mariel's shoe bar

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WEST HARTFORD-A year ago in August, a young woman with law training and a fashion sense opened a shoe boutique on the fashionable Farmington Avenue, and, with the help of two friends, thrust her energies into the nurturing of a new business.

Mariel the Shoe Bar has done well enough to encourage its three partners to open another store in Avon this week.

Shortly after turning 25 last year, Mariel Peck fulfilled a longtime dream of owning her own business when she opened the new shoe store. She was supposed to go on to law school after graduating from UConn with a degree in political science and international relations, but a year in Italy, observing the excitement of the fashion industry, changed her thinking. Just to make sure, upon graduation she spent six months in Boston, working as a paralegal, where she became convinced that joining her father, Atty. Michael Peck, in the family's law firm, Peck & Peck, was not for her.

The striking young blonde is a fashion maven. When she first returned to the Hartford area, she worked in sales at 224 Park, a fashion-forward clothing boutique, which was sold to a new owner shortly after she arrived, and became the Kimberly Boutique. She worked her way up to assistant manager and grew close to the new owner.

"One day a woman came in, at the time that Blu the shoe store was closing, and said that West Hartford needed a shoe store. I knew I could handle product selection in the price points and styles to fill that niche, and that I wanted to provide client service and attention. And I did not want to compete with my former boss in ready-to-wear," she explains.

So the idea for an upscale, fashionable shoe boutique was born. Peck took a job for several months with Footprints, the 35-year-old, family-owned shoe store on the Berlin Turnpike, to learn more about the shoe business. She also enrolled at Hartford College for Women in a crash course for budding entrepreneurs.

One of her partners and a close friend, Guy Neumann, remembers the conversation he had with Peck about business ideas at the time of Blu's closing. He relates, "Blu was going under, so we seized the opportunity. Mariel thought there was a need for a shoe store. I am entrepreneurial, and I came to the table with some fundamental business skills, but it has been a learning experience. The shoe industry is its own business."

Another friend, Stefan Cherneski joined as an investor and helped in setting up the new business. Cherneski played professional hockey with the New York Rangers and was an NHL pick until he irreparably injured his knee. He works for Neumann in Benefit Plan Advisers in Simsbury. Neumann also owns and operates Rex Insurance Services in the same town. The three partners have been friends since their school days.

Neumann remembers meeting Peck for the first time in 1990, when he and his family first moved to the Hartford area from Israel.

He says, "We had a condo on Sky View and her house was the first one on Scarborough Street (Hartford). I was attending my first semester at the Hebrew Academy. I was in the fourth grade, and she was in the sixth. Years later we met again at the JCC gym, and became best friends. Then we dated for awhile. Now we are business associates and friends."

Before he attended the University of Hartford, where he earned degrees in finance and economics from the Barney School of Business, Neumann worked several jobs, including for his brother-in-law Scott Shoham for a time. He also ran a catering business while at college.

The idea of designing the shoe store as a shoe bar came from another of Neumann's school friends and the architect for Tiffany & Company stores, Devro Smith. Neumann explains, "The concept of the shoe bar is that we serve shoes rather than drinks, and the bar becomes the center of the community."

The shoe store owners envision several more shops in the near future. Neumann would like to open a new one every year or 18 months, if all goes well with their projections. He and Peck are in agreement that the next one, after the Avon store, should be east of the river, somewhere in Glastonbury or East Windsor.

For now, Peck is concentrating on keeping up with fashion news in the shoe industry by going to trade shows, learning about new designers in the fashion press, and constantly searching for new vendors to insure that her selection is up-to-date and includes some big names that even the more fashionable department stores in the area do not carry. She also strives to offer a range in prices and an appeal across the generations.

The store is her work and her passion, and it consumes every available hour, six days a week. She reveals, "My father taught me: 'good, better, best, never let it rest until good is better, and better is best.' I know if I put in 110 percent, I have tried my best. This is the opportunity of a lifetime, and I would not be where I am without my two partners."

The newest Mariel shop is located in the Shops at Avon Green, next door to Bangle and Clutch, an accessories boutique. Call (860) 470-0018. The West Hartford store is located at 990 Farmington Avenue in West Hartford Center. Call (860) 523-5534.