

Success is in the bag



The Pink Plaid Handbag
From the Anna Street Studio



The Beach Multi-Stripe Handbag
Available for \$85

Portsmouth designer finds niche with reversible handbags

By JODY RECORD
Union Leader Correspondent

PORTSMOUTH

NOT MUCH MORE than a year ago, Carrie James was getting up at 6 a.m. so she could sew for a couple of hours before heading to her job at a local graphic design company.

After work, it was back to the sewing machine — the same one she didn't even know how to thread when she first started making her reversible handbags — where she stitched until midnight.

Every day. Every night. What a difference a year makes.

In May of 2003, James, founder and owner of Anna Street Studio, quit her day job. Before long, her boyfriend and now-partner, Nick Saunders, did the same.

They now have a studio on McDonough Street where James spends most of her time designing, although, in a pinch, she still gets behind the sewing machine. Two seamstresses will soon become four. A few weeks ago, they hired a manager and, in July, will open their first store.

"Every time we take a step, it's been so nerve-racking," James says. "I think we've both been careful not to grow too quickly."

Go back almost four years. An ex-advertising exec, James was casting about for a creative way to express herself. A sideline artist, she signed up for art classes and began painting sheets, glasses; frames. But that didn't do it. So she decided to turn to fabric.

A few years earlier, her mother had given her a sewing machine; James had never even opened the box. Then a friend took her to Zimmon's fabric store in Lynn, Mass., and James found what she'd been looking for.

"It opened up a whole new world. For someone who had only been in Jo-Ann Fabric, it was incredible," James says. "There was fabric for \$250 a yard. That piqued my interest."

So much so that she began buying bits of cloth; a little here, a little there, until there was enough that it forced the question: what to do with it all? James decided to make handbags.

"I kept breaking needles because the fabric was too heavy. Nick had to figure out how to thread the sewing machine, I



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A selection of Carrie James' bags are on display at her Anna Street Studio in Portsmouth. James' collection includes handbags, change purses, makeup bags, shoppers and totes — all reversible. The extra large bag in the center with the green windowpane fabric and pink bottom is the Twister tote, which sells for \$125. The bag reverses to a design featuring large colorful circles on a white background, seen at the far right.



In her studio, Carrie James, at right, holds what she calls the Anna Street classic, her Pink and Black Polka Dot Handbag, which sells for \$85. The purse reverses to a solid black bag with two pink patch pockets trimmed in black-and-white ribbon that match the handles. Behind James is her Black and White Polka Shopper, which retails for \$105. The reverse side has a scattering of white polka dots on black fabric with a pink bottom and ribbon. Above, a collection of Anna Street bags.

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didn't even know how to do it," James says. "And I made some terrible bags."

It took trial and error to find out such things as how to make the reversible handbags stiff; what worked best in the bottoms. Then she made a beach bag for a friend as a wedding present.

"It was absolutely huge. I

had no idea what I was doing. I made it so complicated," James says. "It had special compartments; it was vinyl lined. I really made it hard on myself."

Following that were four baby bags that took 12 hours to make. She sold them for \$50 a piece at the Snappy Turtle in Florida, a shop whose sister store is in Kennebunkport,

Maine.

"To me, that was it. When I started making bags, I said, if I could sell them at the Snappy Turtle, I'd know they're really good," James says. "When they started to sell, I thought, maybe I should brand them."

Then, last year, she met Annie Loomis who commented on the bag James was carrying.

When James told her she'd made it, Loomis said she wanted to sell them in her Portsmouth shop, Making Faces, an upscale cosmetic store on Ceres Street just down from James' store and soon to be on Fore Street in Portland, Maine.

That was last May and from there, Anna Street has taken off running. The bags are now sold in 20 stores along the East Coast, 14 of which are Lilly Pulitzer shops. A national catalog company recently contacted James about carrying her line. "It all started at Making Faces," James says. "Everything turned around for us as soon as Annie put them in Making Faces."

About the bags. They're made of fresh, crisp fabrics: pink striped seersucker with a watermelon striped reverse side and grosgrain ribbons as accents; lime green with a black and white polka dot bottom; Canada mint green with reversible whale-patterned ribbon. James' signature piece is the handbag. She also offers a change purse, makeup bag, shopper and tote — all reversible.

The price for the handbag is \$85 — or \$42.50 a bag when you consider it's actually two in one. Shoppers are \$105 and the totes sell for \$125. James is already thinking about expanding her line into a lifestyle brand — skirts, dresses, shoes, belts. But for the next year, she plans to just concentrate on accessories.

"There is always the danger of diluting the brand," the corporate refugee says. "I would not want to lose the Anna Street feel. I don't know exactly what that is in words but I know the feel."

About the name. Anna Street is an actual street in Delray, Fla., near the beach that James frequented as a little girl while visiting her grandmother. A few years ago on New Year's Eve, she and Saunders were on that beach. She had just sold her first bags to the Snappy Turtle.

"Nick said, 'Why not name them after the street where you grew up, where you dreamed of what you'd do when you grew up?'" James says. "It's been a whirlwind ever since. Right from the time I get out of bed in the morning, it's like bam, you're off running a marathon; like there are all these balls up in the air and you're afraid you'll drop one. But it's great."

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