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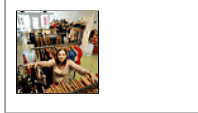
## Made in the Bay Area Hayes Valley clothing shop carries nothing but local designers

Sylvia Rubin, Chronicle Fashion Editor  
Sunday, May 25, 2003

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Behind Blakely Bass' fresh face and calm manner beats the heart of a tenacious entrepreneur.



Not that long ago, she was a premed student, looking at graduate school and that long internship. She decided to chuck it and learn the retail business. All of her Loyola University of New Orleans friends, now in their late 20s, are just beginning their medical internships. "I couldn't see it for myself," says Bass, 29. "I used the money I would have spent on grad school to start a business instead."

The business is RAG (Residents Apparel Gallery) on Octavia Street in San Francisco, a showcase for emerging Bay Area talent, which opened in December. The irony? Like a first-year intern, Bass works all hours, doesn't eat dinner until 10 most nights, takes no weekends off and can barely remember the last time she had a whole day to relax.

Her vision: To sell only locally made clothing by up-and-coming Bay Area **designers**. RAG is an inviting shop in Hayes Valley, with high ceilings, a green floor hand-painted with flowers (Bass and her boyfriend did it themselves), cute window displays and a small but well-edited selection of feminine clothing with an arty, handmade twist. The clothes run the gamut from deconstructed vintage T-shirts, appliqued denims and hand-crocheted newsboy caps to flowing dresses and tops made of scarves, as well as polished, tailored silk-screened dresses. **Designers** rent racks from Bass, paying \$20 to \$50 a month, and get 70 percent of the profits.

Above each rack is a photograph of the designer and a short bio. The effect is that of an art gallery. No other Bay Area boutique is like it, and Bass' reward is that after only five months, the shop is doing well enough for her to think it could be a franchise. Her pride in selling clothing made by people with whom she has forged friendships makes up for the long hours.

"My customers always say they feel so good giving money to a local designer, and that makes me so proud," she says.

All this ambition comes from growing up in a powerhouse of a family. Her mother, Virginia Wetherell, is the former secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection in Florida; her father, Mike Bass, was mayor pro tem of Pensacola, Fla.; and her stepdad, T.K. Wetherell, former speaker of the House of Representatives in Florida, is now president of Florida State University.

So Bass is no stranger to ambition, drive, long hours and hard work, and she learned how to think on her feet. "My mother was gone for weeks at a time," Bass says.

After several stints in retail, Bass drew up a business plan, scouted vacant storefronts around the Haight ("too expensive") and Hayes Valley, then designed the concept for RAG. She applied for a small-business loan. She was advised to try her parents instead.

"I saved half; they gave me the other half to start the shop," she says. Now she just has to keep putting in those hours. "I see so many people my age goofing off, with no direction. I really don't understand that."

The easy part is finding the talent to fill up the racks. Perhaps the most sophisticated lines are from Victoria Allen and Penelope Starr (Susan Robinson and Khloe Sjogren), which is known for its versatile, slim, silk-screened polo-collar dresses (\$175). Designer Allison Nelson of Red Threds makes one-shoulder tanks with handmade grosgrain bow details (\$45) that are also sold at Fred Segal in Los Angeles. Jennifer Serwer of Hol Animal makes



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tanks and halters by piecing together recycled cashmere and wool; the buttonhole placket of a vintage sweater becomes the hem of a new tank (\$120). Mahnee Titus makes dresses out of scarves, and flattering two-button jackets with topstitching that are both sophisticated and whimsical (\$75).

Bass scouts all the sample sales she can to find talent, she says, then chooses with her well-developed eye. "I carry lots of things made with vintage fabrics, deconstructed stuff, with the seams all over the place, zigzag stitches and patches," Bass says, "and also some beautifully tailored and polished things. I think I have something here for everyone."

Except for men.

"I've yet to get a menswear designer in here that will be a good fit," she says. "That's really been frustrating."

The hard part is letting someone go because Bass needs to keep the stock continually replenished.

Is she a frustrated designer herself? "Well, I sew. . . . I want to make clothes . . . but I don't leave the shop till 9 p.m., I have dinner at 10 . . .

I really envy the artists who have the time."

*E-mail Sylvia Rubin at [srubin@sfchronicle.com](mailto:srubin@sfchronicle.com).*

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