

Fashion Is A Cinch For Belt Designer Turned Boutique Owner

After the belt market buckled, Richard Fredrick found a new notch on Adams for eco-friendly, cruelty-free merchandise

By Christy Scannell

When your mom's a buyer at Nordstrom and a friend of the Nordstrom family, it's difficult not to grow up with a feel for fashion, says Rick Fredrick, owner of Richard Fredrick, a new clothing boutique on Adams Avenue.

But even though he and his two brothers all found their first jobs at the upscale chain, Fredrick was not motivated toward a career in retail.

"It seemed like a second nature, but that was it," he says. Instead, he pursued an interest in international relations.

Until he discovered belts.

In the mid-90s, Fredrick started making custom belts, working out of an Ocean Beach rental. Soon he was employing six handcrafters full-time, making several hundred belts and key chains a week. (Take a guess which store was his key account.)

The unique quality about Fredrick's belts was they were made without animal products — no leather, no suede.

"People thought at first that if it was not real leather it must be a lower quality, but the faux suede we'd get from Japan is more expensive than leather," says Fredrick, a 20-year vegetarian. "We had very few competitors."

The belt market buckled in the late 90s when styles changed, so Fredrick went back to school, earning a degree in fine arts at USD, followed by a



In addition to custom-made belts and key chains, Richard Fredrick showcases other designers' "cruelty-free" product, such as high-fashion Charmone shoes (\$225-\$300) from Bologna, Italy. (photo/courtesy Richard Fredrick)

Fredrick felt his art degree was helpful but inadequate for a career in fashion, so he moved to New York, where he graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology, followed by a stint at Tommy Hilfiger. But shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, the native Californian decided it was time to come home.

"I loved New York but it was a war zone after 9-11 and I felt no need to stay," he says.

He moved to L.A., where he worked at trendy Fred Segal for a year. But when he saw belts coming back in vogue in 2003, he decided to ride out the wave again in Ocean Beach, but this time he opened a shop on Newport Avenue in addition to wholesaling his creations.

"It was too soon. We were too high end for OB then," Fredrick says about the store. "So I decided to refocus my energies solely on wholesaling."

When Fredrick, a Kensington resident, passed by the 3316 Adams Ave. building with the funky Spanish architecture last year and saw it was renovated and available, he decided to give shopkeeping another shot.

"The space is amazing," he says. "The owner put in concrete floors and redid the exterior. It's got a garden. I couldn't pass it up."

Richard Fredrick opened in September, just in time for the Adams Avenue Street Fair, offering Fredrick's trademark belts and key chains plus other designers' clothing. According

to Fredrick, it is the first "eco-friendly" clothing boutique in San Diego.

"I wanted to expand on veganism, and that means putting a low human footprint on the environment, so I only buy from companies that are organic or eco-friendly," he says.

As with the imitation leather he uses for the belts, he says the materials these companies use for their clothing is as good or better than animal-based supplies. To make his point, he pulls soft cotton T-shirts, designer jeans and even artful shoes off the store's racks to allow a visitor to view the items' quality and craftsmanship.

"The concept is huge," he says. "People want to feel like they're buying something fashion-forward but wear it for the greater good."

Fredrick says he's still trying to figure out the shop's client base.

"I feel this neighborhood is rapidly changing with the Starbucks, a gourmet pizza place across the street and a yoga studio," he says. "I thought it would be the lower-end things that would sell well but our higher-end is our best selling stuff. We've been extremely well received here."

Fredrick plans to expand in 2008 with stores in San Francisco and Honolulu. He also hopes to add a tea cart in the Normal Heights location's front patio, and put in a garden to provide flowers and vegetables for neighbors. This month, he will debut handbags to go with his couture belts.

"This [business] provides an opportunity for me to be creative and to help others understand the concept of what they're doing (when they buy non-environmentally friendly products) and the damage it causes," he says. "It's a very exciting time to have this."

Richard Fredrick (523-1132/mantadirect.com) is open Tuesday through Saturday noon to 7 p.m. or by appointment. ♦



With one successful store in Normal Heights, Rick Fredrick looks to take his eco-friendly boutique to San Francisco and Honolulu in 2008. (photo/Ed Frey III)

year of study in Florence, Italy, where he found himself drawn to fashion.

"(Italians) still treat fashion like an art form," he says. "After seeing the jewelry and fashion there, I was inspired. I knew I was in the right field at that point."



"I have some people who come in just to see Chaos," says Fredrick about his four-month-old, extraordinarily playful kitten. (photo/courtesy Richard Fredrick)