

Naturally, everything on sale at this shop is green Eco-friendly boutique proves one person's trash is another's treasure

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By Denise Taylor, Globe Correspondent | August 21, 2005

Paige O'Brien and Didi Chadran are betting that their little shop can sell a big idea.

Browse the shelves of Dunia Ecostore in Maynard Center, which the couple opened in February, and you might think you've stumbled onto something that could be dubbed "The Hall of Ingenuity."

Funky bags on display turn out to be cut from former highway billboards (the sturdy vinyl-laminated nylon ads are both chic and waterproof). Tags reveal that the seemingly normal backpacks for sale were spun from plastic soda bottles. Among the elegant, slightly reblown glassware sits a lovely set that began life as vessels for Perrier.

But O'Brien and Chadran are offering more than clever gifts, toys, and household items. What they are really selling is an earth-friendly consumer ideal.

Each item at Dunia -- from remnant throw pillows, natural nail polish, and recycled glass jewelry to organic cotton baby clothes and nontoxic doggie water bowls -- is environmentally friendly.

All are also cruelty-free (no animal testing or products). A good number are fair-trade goods (bought directly from overseas cooperatives with fair wages and using no child labor). And recycled or locally made goods abound (like the toothbrushes and razors made by Waltham-based Recycline Inc., mainly from recycled Stonyfield Yogurt cups).

"It started with how we were living in our own household," said O'Brien, explaining that their dedication to "green" goods took firm hold after the birth of their son Max in 2000.

"Having kids changed the stakes for us in terms of putting our money where our mouths and minds had been," added Chadran, whose heritage is Indonesian. He uses the nickname Didi instead of his given name, Achmad.

With Max now in the family, their food choices, which were already vegan, shifted toward organic and whole foods. Switching to natural and cruelty-free body and cleaning products was the next step. Eventually, they found themselves avoiding excessive packaging, trolling through thrift stores to recycle used goods, and waiting for a year to purchase a Prius, Toyota's hybrid car.

At the time, O'Brien was a massage therapist and Chadran was working in the high-technology field. "We both felt it was OK for me to be in an industry that had a mixed track record with the environment as long as we voted with our dollars for green alternatives," said Chadran.

The couple, who then lived in Cambridge, had become what marketers call LOHAS consumers (an acronym for Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability). The Natural Marketing Institute, which researches green market trends, reported this year that 23 percent of all US adults are LOHAS shoppers, who care deeply enough about the environment and social responsibility to help fuel a \$2.86 billion market (and growing) for such products annually.

The institute also reports that 38 percent of consumers inconsistently make purchases based on LOHAS values, 27 percent occasionally consider LOHAS issues when shopping but tend not to act on their concerns, and 12 percent never consider the environmental or social impact of the products they purchase.

By 2002, Chadran and O'Brien wanted to take their commitment further by going into green business themselves. Among several concepts they nixed was a whole foods version of Store24 inspired by a vegan convenience store in Portland, Ore.

"We didn't want to stay up all night, but I still think that's a huge untapped market," said Chadran. Finally, they settled on a green general store idea that morphed into a boutique.

It was a life-altering change they felt they needed a PowerPoint presentation to get through. "People are going to think we're propeller-headed geeks, but it really cleared our thinking and made sure we didn't leave any stones unturned," said Chadran, 45.

In an 11-screen presentation, "we laid out all the good things we had: a nice home [they moved to Harvard in 2001], a nice town, a 2-year-old; things we wanted: to have another baby in a certain amount of time; to open the store; and how we would do it," said O'Brien, 34.

"We used it to convince our family and friends we weren't crazy, that this wasn't just a whim," said Chadran, adding that they also developed a full business plan.

But their concept required more than family approval. It also took a leap of faith. Market data show marked increases in the purchase of organic products, green building materials, and energy-efficient appliances. Even organic pet supply sales, which were estimated by Packaged Facts at \$527 million in 2004, are expected to more than double in the next five years.

"But when you get to earth-friendly stationery and home decor, you have to do a lot of extrapolating," said Chadran. "Based on the information we had, our thinking was that as people grow more aware and are more concerned about the things they put into and on their bodies, they might grow equally concerned about the things they surround themselves with in their homes."

Where to find green consumers was the next question. The pair spent most of 2004 searching for sites in well-heeled towns along Route 2. But one day O'Brien took a swing through Maynard, with her second son, Bodhi (whom Chadran jokingly calls "the PowerPoint baby"), in the back seat.

"I didn't know much about Maynard, but the town center was so cute, and we had read in Boston magazine the previous spring that it was the Harvard Square of metro west," said O'Brien.

Without the tourist traffic of nearby towns such as Lexington and Concord, Maynard was a gamble. But after extensive eco-friendly renovations (the floors are bamboo, a sustainable, low-chemical crop; the shelves are either recycled cardboard or used furnishings; the adhesives used for the carpentry are nontoxic), Dunia opened and Maynard's LOHAS crowd found its way to the energy-efficient-lighted store.

"It turns out that there are a lot of people here in town who have moved out here from Arlington, Jamaica Plain, Somerville, Cambridge. They're first-time home buyers, young families who enjoyed seeing a store like this that reminded them of the towns they left," said Chadran.

And trends indicate that, just as Chadran and O'Brien made the shift when they became parents, new families are ripe for the green market. For many, items like organic baby food and milk are stepping stones to other earth-friendly products.

"We care about our kids and pets more than we do about ourselves, so products like these provide gateways," said Steve French, managing partner of the Natural Marketing Institute and coauthor of the 2005 LOHAS study.

As word spread, consumers from surrounding towns also headed to Dunia (which is the Indonesian word for world). "We've met so many interesting people. One couple from Concord, whose house burned to the ground, is rebuilding green from the ground up, so they came in to purchase books on green building from us.

"A family from Boxborough that only eats organic and even mills their own grains comes in for organic chocolate. A couple from Stow that is building a straw-bale house comes in for magazines and other things," said Chadran.

But mostly, they just get regular shoppers who like the selection, which is part of the goal. "The idea is to get the community in here, hanging out, and getting educated," said O'Brien.

Among the top sellers are the hand-made cards embedded with flower seeds that, once read, can be planted as is. Other hits are the bamboo cutting boards and bowls, the unusual jewelry (such as watches with bands made from old typewriter keys), bottle-cap belts, and cushy Hug-a-Planet stuffed globes made from organic cotton.

Each item has its own appeal and benefit. Gifts such as banana fiber mobiles, colorful baskets made from telephone wire, photo albums with covers crafted from used license plates, frames and candle holders with moving gears made from old bicycle parts -- all make use of items otherwise headed for landfills.

The billboard-recycling bag company, Relan, says it prevents about eight tons of ad materials from landing in the trash yearly. The bamboo lattice lamps on sale are the result of their creator's distress that, by some estimates, roughly 25 million trees and bamboo plants are used each year to produce single-use chopsticks in China. Now Brian Parks of California sanitizes some of those sticks to create "chopstick eco art" fixtures.

It may just be shopping that Dunia offers, but "it comes from a sense of empowerment," said Chadran. "You have to feel that you can make a difference in everything that you do, whether small or great."

"By opening a store like this, we give people choices that may not be readily available to them," he added. "We raise awareness of some of the issues that are near and dear to our hearts, and we build and become part of a community that we care about, and want to do something about the environment and about the state of our world."

Or, as Planet Dog, which makes the recycled chew ball, on sale next to the sustainable hemp collars, advertises: At Dunia, shoppers can support "our planet one fetch at a time." ■

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