

Business Beat: Values work for Harvard couple



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Harvard -

When strolling down the center of Maynard, you'll encounter a

plethora of different stores and restaurants. Nestled on Nason Street is a store called Dunia that immediately draws your attention. The outside storefront windowpane signifies peace, with a hand painting of planet earth alongside two white doves.

As you enter the store, you'll find a welcoming presence of calming rhythmic music, while art displays showcasing local artists fill the warm, earth-toned walls. You'll soon be on a discovery of eco-conscious products that tread lightly on planet earth. The store is the brainchild of eco-conscious Harvard residents Paige O'Brien and Didi Chadran.

O'Brien said that she and her husband, both originally from Cambridge, found a home in Harvard, having moved here six years ago. "Harvard is a great town," said O'Brien. "We love how just about everyone is involved in local politics. We love Harvard's commitment to green space and conservation. . . . the Unitarian Church in the town center became a great vehicle for meeting like-minded people. We also love the fact that we have neighbors who launch ambitious socially-conscious initiatives like Growing Places, Harvard Local and SOSHarvard."

Talking about how she and her husband came up with the idea to open up an eco-store, O'Brien said, "The store grew out of a burning desire to try to combine our beliefs with our day-to-day work. When we buy things, we try to think in terms of life-cycle investment instead of expediency. Nothing makes us crazy like cheap, poorly made and ultimately disposable products, the kind you can't seem to avoid at superstores and major chains. We also have issues with sweatshop labor, petroleum-based plastics and ingredients, abuse of pesticides and chemical fertilizers and vivisection." After some demographic research and going with a gut feeling, Dunia was born in February of 2005. The word "dunia" is Indonesian for earth.

Before the idea of Dunia emerged and before O'Brien was married, she held many jobs and couldn't quite find her niche in the world. She decided to join a group of friends traveling across the country in a VW bus looking to interview captains of industry, politicians, visionaries, entertainers and musicians and gather their perspective on life and their secrets of success. They met many influential people — including former President Jimmy Carter, Billy Crystal and Henry Winkler. The project became a critically acclaimed documentary called "The Journey," which won several prestigious film festival awards.

O'Brien said the products in the Dunia store fall into three main categories: environmentally sustainable, fair trade and cruelty-free. On one side of the store you might find 100 percent organic cotton T-shirts along with T-shirts made out of soy, corn or bamboo. You might think that those items are only edible, but rest assured they are very comfortable materials, free of the chemical-based dyes found in most mass-produced garments.

Other interesting treasures include beaded necklaces made out recycled magazines, recycled record albums made into bowls, women's handbags made out of discarded movie posters along with glassware made out of recycled wine bottles.

Customers will also find recycled cashmere yarn, home décor, coffees and teas, household cleaners, personal care products like toothbrushes, linens, throw pillows, and wicker bowls and baskets. There is a "kid's corner" that includes hardwood toys, organic stuffed toys and cooperative games that have no winners or losers. And there is an array of compact discs, books and magazines that promote an alternative thought process outside the mainstream media.

One Dunia customer described shopping there as a calming and toxic-free experience, noting a sense of happiness when she leaves the store. She said she feels good about buying environmentally responsible products, adding that she prefers shopping there to going to a mall.

O'Brien notes the philosophy behind Dunia. "You know we'd never say 'buy this' or 'you should buy that,' but if anybody asks about a certain product — say for example organic lollipops or fair-trade chocolate — we're happy to explain how they differ from what they find at some other stores. It's about providing alternatives, really, then explaining why some alternatives might be better for some people."

To learn more about Dunia, visit <http://www.duniaecostore.com>.