

Carried Away: Marketing Alum's Handbags Taking Off

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Like 47

At first glance, fashion designer and W. P. Carey alumnus Jennifer Boonlorn's two-story modern studio off of Camelback is reminiscent of a busy New York apartment. It has a stark city vibe with bright white walls, bold furniture and vibrant handbags and accessories from her own fashion line – **Soul Carrier** – that hang on the walls as art work to inspire further creativity.



But take a step back into her kitchen nook and be transported into a delicious aroma, warm tones and her dad's beautiful, yellowed architectural sketches framed on the walls. Her home embodies who she is: modern city sleek coupled with sunny Arizona family girl.

"I was born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona," says Jennifer. "I love it here. So when making the decision on where to go to college, attending ASU for marketing was an easy choice."

Jennifer inherited her dad's eye for design, but he wanted a different future for his daughter.

"My dad was an architect and I think he didn't want me to deal with the politics of design," says Jennifer. "So he really encouraged me to seek out law and become an attorney."

Jennifer wasn't naturally drawn to law but when her parents died in a car crash during her junior year of college, she considered pursuing that route after graduating from ASU in 2001 with her bachelor's degree in business.

"I thought, 'I'm going to go back to school to earn my graduate degree and become a lawyer to honor my parents' memory,'" says Jennifer. "But that was just not a fit."

Instead, Jennifer explored her interests, which always brought her back to design.

The fundamentals

"I took a few fashion courses at Mesa Community College (MCC), such as History of Fashion and Color Theory, and they just amazed me. I thought, 'This is what I should be doing,'" says Jennifer. "And while at MCC, we did a tour of



New York City for a week where we got to peek into the fashion world, and I just fell in love. So I took Parsons School of Design's two-year post-graduate program which taught me design, merchandising, and fashion marketing."

While a student at Parsons, Jennifer interned at Oscar de la Renta and Women's Wear Daily. She then stayed in New York and worked with the design and production team at American Eagle.

"I just loved it," says Jennifer of her experience with American Eagle. "The vibe, the work, it was amazing."

Jennifer stayed in New York for four years soaking up all of the knowledge, experience and inspiration that she could. Yet Arizona always seemed to be calling her back home.

"When my sister gave birth to her daughter, Blake, I knew it was time to come home," says Jennifer. "I wanted to see my niece grow up. And, at the same time, I was just missing Arizona. At the end of the day, I'm much more a Southwest girl. New York City is magic, but I missed the sunshine, and having space . . . and a car. I was really ready to come home."

Soul Carrier

"I moved back to Arizona in the summer of 2009," says Jennifer. "At the time, Barney's was opening here in Phoenix. Cathy Jahnke was hired by Macerich to put on an event associated with the opening. It was called 'The

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Mannequin Is Our Muse,' and Cathy asked if I would help recruit people to design and decorate a mannequin. We ended up recruiting 120 artists and vendors to participate."

Jennifer participated as well, collaborating with a friend.

"We went all over the place searching for materials to use," says Jennifer. "We went to the art museum, Home Depot, the dollar store, you name it. We ended up finding this interesting material made from recycled fabrics and thought it was cool, but we weren't sure if - or how - we would use it. So we brought it home and started messing around with it and found that it makes a very different kind of avant-garde piece."

"I then thought that I should really do something with this material," Jennifer continues. "My friend really encouraged me to sew up some prototypes." The prototypes included bags made from the recycled fabrics woven together with canvas interiors and webbing. Her friend suggested the name "Carrier" for her fashion line, but Jennifer wanted to incorporate one of her favorite and most inspiring words, "soul," into the name. With that "Soul Carrier" was born.

"That was in 2009," says Jennifer. "And since then it has just been a lot of finding production people, building a brand, marketing and distribution. It's just been laying the foundation."

The common thread

"It's so amazing because Parsons gave me the fashion background and opportunities," says Jennifer. "But it's really what I learned while at W. P. Carey and the ASU contacts and networking that have really helped get my business going."

"W. P. Carey really emphasized how important networking is in business," she continues. "I've kept in touch with **Beth Walker** through the years and she invites me to the **Spirit of Enterprise** every year. It is at the Spirit event that I met Jane Spicer of Daphne's Headcovers, who has become my new manufacturer."

Before working with Jane, Jennifer was using a manufacturing facility in New Jersey that also manufactured many large, global fashion brands. By working with Jane, Jennifer has been able to be more hands-on and learn a lot about the manufacturing process while bringing down the price of her products.

"I love that Soul Carrier's bags are created and made in Arizona," says Jennifer. "None of that would have happened without my contacts at ASU."

"It is also the fundamental business background from W. P. Carey that has been key to me launching Soul Carrier," says Jennifer. "A part of me can be completely creative and all over the place but then those business fundamentals ground me and I remind myself that it is a business and we need to turn a profit - it's a complementary combination: business and creativity."

"I think ASU also taught me to know where my weaknesses are and to fill in those gaps with experts," she says. "I brought on a sales person because I just dread going on sales calls. And accounting is not my strongest skill. So I've figured out who can help me in certain areas so I can focus on the parts that I am strong at."

Next steps

Soul Carrier offers five different styles and sizes of handbags: An oversize wristlet, the large Kelly Beth tote, the slightly smaller urban tote, a clutch that doubles as an iPad case, and a messenger bag. Her pieces are offered at various museum gift shops, boutiques and spas around the Valley and on her **website**.

But Jennifer is not stopping there.

"I want to continue with this material but do different accessories like little leather wallets and reverse them so the recycled material is the liner," says Jennifer. "My goal is to compete on a national stage."

It's not far-fetched given that her headband accessories are already being sold in department stores in New York City and even being displayed in Henri Bendel's 5th Avenue windows. And she has the support of her W. P. Carey family back in Arizona.

"I think Jennifer is about to embark on a wonderful journey with Soul Carrier," says **Detra Montoya**, associate professor of marketing for W. P. Carey School of Business. "She has a unique product and a passion to succeed. I am really impressed by Jennifer's ability to network with other successful business owners, not only to learn from them, but to also explore potential partnerships. This is an incredibly valuable skill for a small business owner in the early stages of the business. Down the road, I envision Jennifer mentoring other aspiring designers."

For Jennifer, it's mainly about doing what she loves and sharing it with the world.

"At the end of the day, I love innovating," says Jennifer. "I feel like I'm in alignment and I'm my best when I'm creating and designing. I want to share what I'm making with others."

