

# BULLETIN

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# FASHION FORWARD

BY RHEA HIRSHMAN

While “fashion influencer” is probably not the first description that comes to mind when thinking of the School’s array of accomplished alumni and alumnae, a significant number of alums have put their stamp on the world of fashion and style.

**CORSETS, BEGONE!** Born Mary Phelps Jacobs in 1891, and known at school as Polly, Caresse Crosby graduated from Rosemary Hall in 1910. After divorcing her first husband, Richard Peabody, with whom she had two children, Polly married Harry Crosby. The couple led an extravagant and sometimes scandalous expatriate lifestyle. After Harry’s death, Caresse (as she was known by then) returned to Paris, where she continued Black Sun Press, the literary press she and Harry founded, which published works by Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound, among others. As World War II loomed, she returned to the U.S., married again, and divorced – but also founded Women Against War and worked to establish a center for world peace after the war ended. Caresse lived out the rest of her life in Rome, where she purchased a castle that served as an artist colony. She died in 1970.

But the reason Caresse Crosby belongs in the pantheon of Choate’s fashion influencers is that she received the first patent for the modern brassiere.

Although fashionable dress for women was beginning to change, stiff, unyielding corsets were still in style when Polly was attending dances and meeting eligible young men. Before a debutante ball in 1910, Polly found herself with a dilemma: her corset showed from under her dress’s low neckline and sheer fabric. Working with her maid, she stitched together two silk handkerchiefs and some ribbon and cord. Friends and relations began to ask her to make the garment for them. The story goes that when a stranger offered her a dollar for one of her creations, Polly realized that she had a business opportunity. In November 1914, the U.S. Patent Office issued her a patent for the “backless brassiere.” Within a few years, she sold the patent to the Warner Brothers Corset Company. In her later years, she commented, “I can’t say the brassiere will ever take as great a place in history as the steamboat, but I did invent it.”

  
Feature



Cresse Crosby RH 1910,  
inventor of first patented  
brassiere, in Castello di  
Rocca Sinibalda, Italy,  
mid 1950s. Photo credit:  
The John Deakin Archive.

**FROM SCULPTURE TO LADIES' HATS** Eric Javits Jr. '75 didn't plan to start a hat business after studying painting and sculpture at Rhode Island School of Design. But a scheme to get into New York's famous Studio 54 turned out to be the beginning of a career.

"My friend Mimi and I knew that people were hand-picked at the door because of their celebrity status or because of how they looked," Eric says. "From scraps of velvet and silk I handmade a stunning pillbox that Mimi wore, along with her black Yves Saint Laurent dress. I threw on a white dinner jacket. And we got in ahead of hundreds of others queued up that night. I had so much fun creating that hat that I made more. When Mimi and my sister Jocelyn wore them, women started asking where they got their hats. Before I knew it, I found myself in business."

That business has since turned into an internationally celebrated brand. In 1995, Eric's company introduced the Squishee hat, the product with which he is most closely identified. Recognizing the need for straw sun hats that could be packed for travel without losing their shape, Eric developed a braid material that resembles straw but is lightweight and flexible. A few years later, the company introduced Shenia braid, a leathery textile that is the cold-weather version of Squishee.

Although he views himself more as an artist than a CEO – "Inspiration comes sometimes when I least expect it," he says – he still must pay attention to everything from sales to production to public relations. "Today the fashion business is completely dominated by big brand luxury conglomerates, which is the greatest challenge for a small company like mine," he explains. "There are work days when very little or none of my time is devoted to design."

Still, the design process remains Eric's first love, and if he has not had time to spend on it during the week, he will often devote his weekends to it. "I believe creativity is a divine gift," he says, "and it is a gift I am grateful for every day. Although fashion is often criticized for being external or superficial, I disagree strongly. Fashion can lift people up and allow them to express who they are."

**FASHION MEETS TECHNOLOGY** Even as a young girl, Sylvia Heisel '80 wanted to be a fashion designer. "I'm not sure why," she says. "No one in my family does anything remotely related to the field. But I always liked the idea of creating things that can make people look and feel beautiful."

After leaving college, Sylvia began a freelance design career, with her first independent collection appearing in 1988. Her line was particularly noted for its evening wear.

Over the past decade, Sylvia's career has evolved away from mainstream fashion design and business ownership toward exploring new ways to design and make clothing – particularly new technologies for more individualized and more sustainable manufacturing through the use of 3D printing.

"My brand and the clothes we produced began to feel less interesting to me, and to seem less relevant to the world we're living in," she says. Traditional manufacturing structures meant limited creativity because of their reliance on a small range of fabrics and sewing techniques. Her current company, Heisel (heisel.co), works with fashion brands and apparel manufacturers to develop smart wearables and integrate 3D printing into their product development and collections. While e-commerce and social media have transformed how we find and buy clothes, Sylvia notes that

fashion is far behind other global industries in its use of technology. "It's crazy," she says, "that we can 3D print airplane parts and human organs, but not wearable clothing."

Sylvia envisions zero-waste clothes printed to order in compostable materials. That technology is coming along, but is not yet available at a commercially viable scale. The technologies that Heisel is working with also hold promise for creating "smart clothes" that can shed water, warm up or cool down (her company is working on a 3D printed solar heated vest), and monitor health conditions. "We can make clothes that are better for the people who wear them, the people who make them, and the planet," Sylvia says.



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*“WE CAN MAKE CLOTHES THAT ARE BETTER FOR THE PEOPLE WHO WEAR THEM, THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE THEM, AND THE PLANET.”*

– SYLVIA HEISEL '80



**BELOW** One of Sylvia Heisel's 3D printed designs. Heisel was named to the "Top 100 Women in Wearable and Consumer Tech." On October 31, Sylvia and her husband, Scott, will be on campus for a costume creation workshop for Halloween.



***“STYLE AND SUBSTANCE ARE NOT TWO SEPARATE WORLDS. STYLE IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN WHAT YOU WEAR. IT IS ABOUT THE TOTALITY OF HOW YOU PRESENT YOURSELF IN THE WORLD.”*** – KATE BETTS '82

**FASHION INFLUENCER** When Kate Betts '82 landed in Paris shortly after graduating from Princeton, she arrived with no job, but fluent in French and Spanish, and with dreams of becoming a foreign correspondent. After freelancing for a while, she landed a position at *Women's Wear Daily*, hoping to cover food and travel. But publisher John Fairchild insisted that she cover fashion. Kate remembers: “I went to an Yves Saint Laurent preview with him and thought, ‘There are amazing characters here – and fashion is one of the most important motifs of French culture.’ And I decided, yes, I want to write about these people.”

She covered everything fashion-related, from parties to fabrics to finance. “WWD,” she says, “is where I learned how to get a story. It’s where I became a real reporter – and I think of myself as a reporter more than anything. You can use fashion as a way to tell the stories of what is going on in a culture.”

Kate has been an influential voice in the fashion world. She became associate bureau chief for WWD in Paris, then returned to New York, where she wrote for, and took over as, fashion news director of *Vogue*. In 1999, she was appointed editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar* at 35, the youngest editor ever at the country's oldest fashion magazine. Four years later, she was named editor-at-large at *Time*, where she created the magazine's first globally published style supplement. Her articles on fashion, lifestyle, travel, and culture have appeared in publications including *The New York Times*, *Glamour*, *New York*, *Elle*, *Travel+Leisure*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

For the past four years, Kate has run her own company, KateBetts+Co, which develops communications strategies and creates print and online content for luxury brands such as Estee Lauder, Chanel, and DFS. *My Paris Dream: An Education in Style, Slang, and Seduction in the Great City on the Seine*, her 2015 memoir detailing her love affair with the City of Light, was a *New York Times* bestseller.

She is also the author of a critically acclaimed book on Michelle Obama: *Everyday Icon: Michelle Obama and the Power of Style*. “Style and substance are not two separate worlds,” she says. “Michelle Obama intrigued me because she embodied both seamlessly. Style is about much more than what you wear. It is about the totality of how you present yourself in the world.”



**FASHION INSIDER** For Caroline Tulenko Brown '86, it's the business side of fashion that is the most intriguing. As someone who has held senior executive positions with some of the industry's best-known brands – Giorgio Armani, Carolina Herrera, Donna Karan International – she made the deliberate choice, she says, “to join businesses that were either in meaningful growth mode or at a point of disruption and change.”

In her most recent position – chief executive officer for Donna Karan International at LVMH – she was credited with gracefully managing the departure of founder Karan, bringing in new creative leadership, repositioning the brand, and leading the business through a sale of the company. Her prior position was as president of luxury fashion house Carolina Herrera, a global company that she also led through a period of significant change.

“When people ask how I ended up in fashion after getting my undergraduate degree in psychology,” Caroline says, “I tell them that my passion has always really been about people, and that fashion is a beautiful creative field in which to solve problems and motivate individuals and teams to do their best work.”

She also loves the adventure and variety. “I could be in any part of the globe in any given week, visiting partners, retail stores, or wholesalers. We could be working on strategy, marketing, product development, legal issues, or financial planning. The public sees the glamour of the industry, but the inside requires great discipline and hard work in a highly competitive landscape.”

For Caroline, that landscape keeps the industry interesting as it responds to changing consumer needs and values, and determines how best to embrace new technologies. “Companies need to adjust to a business model that prioritizes direct-to-consumer contact and an embracing of new data science,” she says.

Currently, Caroline is an adviser to the MIT Martin Trust Center supporting entrepreneurship; to Alante Capital, which invests in solutions for sustainability in the fashion industry; and to LOOK Optic, an eye-wear startup. She was recently appointed to Choate Rosemary Hall's Board of Trustees. As she looks toward her next professional challenges, she offers this advice: “Whenever I saw an opportunity to improve the business, I raised my hand! I think this is the most important strategy for growing your career: Find the empty space that needs to be filled to help the business, and take the initiative to go there.”

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**FINDING A SEAT AT THE TABLE** If you were a student at Choate Rosemary Hall 15 years ago, wondering what to wear around campus, you might have had the guidance of LeAnne Armstead '04, who wrote about fashion and style for the News. "I was telling students, wear this, don't wear that," she remembers.

LeAnne continued writing about fashion while a student at Villanova, where she did a fashion internship with *Esquire* magazine and wrote fashion columns for the student newspaper. After graduating with a major in communication and a minor in Spanish, LeAnne took a paid internship at Time, Inc., then spent three years as an advertising specialist for Lord & Taylor, coordinating marketing for sportswear, cosmetics, and dresses.

There, she had her first significant experience with the business end of fashion. It was also, she says, "the first place where I had to think about who I am, how to present myself, and how to fit in while maintaining my own sensibility. I am a tall, curvy African American woman. There are not a lot in the industry who look like me. And you have to be especially smart and diligent when operating in a space where people don't look like you."

Two years as associate manager for marketing operations with Shiseido Cosmetics followed her time at Lord & Taylor. Her next position was as a marketing manager for Ralph Lauren, where she was responsible for a \$4 million budget. It was a job she loved, and at which she had great success both personally and professionally. "I definitely had a seat at the table," she says. But, after four years, the company's internal challenges – including a major restructuring – began to take a toll. For LeAnne, as a woman of color, the toll was magnified. Longer hours and harder work were not recognized or compensated. She decided to leave Ralph Lauren and the fashion industry.

For the past year, LeAnne has been digital marketing senior manager for the Hearst Corp. But fashion is where her heart is, and a field she hopes to return to. "I love being able to work with clothes, to think about how one piece will look with another – putting together simple garments to produce a sense of confidence and style. If you can create a look for someone and make it come alive, you can see it in their eyes. They feel like they can conquer anything."

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–LEANNE ARMSTEAD '04

***“WE’RE A GOOD FIT NOT ONLY FOR PERFORMERS AND CELEBRITIES, BUT FOR THE BRIDE, THE MOTHER OF THE BRIDE, OR THE YOUNG WOMAN GOING TO HER PROM. WE MAKE PRODUCTS THAT ARE BOTH BEAUTIFUL AND COMFORTABLE.”*** – GREG GIMBLE ’01

**THE BRA REINVENTED** It didn’t take long for Greg Gimble ’01 to decide to join the family business. After majoring in political economy at Tulane and spending two years as an analyst at a startup bank, Greg came on board at Va Bien, a high-end women’s lingerie company founded by his parents, Richard and Marianne Gimble, in the late 1970s. “My parents had just patented a new kind of bra cup that would keep strapless bras from sliding,” he says. “I was intrigued by the idea of bringing that design breakthrough to market.”

Now, as Va Bien’s creative director, Greg oversees the company’s overall design development and marketing strategies. Va Bien’s creations, sold in about 500 hundred boutiques and specialty stores as well as online, include “everyday bras,” body suits, panties, loungewear, and specialty bras designed for wearing with, for instance, low-cut or backless garments.

Wardrobe departments in film, television, music, and dance turn to Va Bien to help dress their celebrities, and Va Bien shapewear is a (discreet) staple during awards show season. “We’re a good fit not only for performers and celebrities,” Greg says, “but for the bride, the mother of the bride, or the young woman going to her prom. We make products that are both beautiful and comfortable.”

Bringing a new bra design from concept to successful prototype, and then to the manufactured product, is not easy. Knowing something about physics – about tension and resistance – helps. “Bras require enormous precision in both the design and the manufacturing,” Greg says. “All the components – the materials themselves, the cutting, the sewing, the molding – have to be just right, or even the best design will not work.”

Greg predicts changes in manufacturing with the rise of 3D printing – “probably fewer big factories and more local producers,” he says, “and greater options for creating custom fits.” As those changes unfold, Va Bien will be there. In the meantime, what continues to matter most, he says, “is that when any woman puts on a Va Bien design, it helps her to feel her best.”

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*Rhea Hirshman is a freelance writer based in New Haven. She also teaches women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at the University of Connecticut in Stamford, and is a former member of the Choate Rosemary Hall English Department.*

