

PACKAGING THE GIFT WITHIN

By Meredith Keller

Strength. Determination. Belief. These are the characteristics that Texas designer Pat Dahnke called upon, when cancer claimed the life of her two-year old son, Kent in 1985. In honor of his memory, her faith in God and the spirit that encouraged her creativity to emerge, Pat pushed through her grief by focusing on those things in her life that meant so much to her - her daughter, Tara, just eight years old when her brother died, her love of horses and her ability to help women feel beautiful.

She began her runway to fashion design when she married her next door neighbor, a dress salesman, and opened three clothing stores in the Houston area, called Damsels in Distress, to retail the designer dress samples that her husband would have warehoused during each season. The stores would be full of these dress samples, which then led to their ability to purchase these brands at a discount in order to stock the stores. Pat then grew the business to include other designers she would find on her fashion buying trips to New York. Business was doing very well despite the economic problems plaguing Houston, and most of Texas, during the oil bust of the 80's. Then her son was diagnosed with cancer, and the family spent seven agonizing months at Texas Children's Hospital before his death. During this time, Pat sold two of the three clothing shops from the hospital room and emerged from the experience heartbroken, divorced and broke.

It was at this time that her faith in God grew and she felt that he was speaking to her and guiding her into the next phase of her amazing life. Through the insomnia that haunted her after her son's death, Pat's creativity flowed and she began designing her own clothing and accessories on an old sewing machine. With rent to pay and the bills piling up, she had a brilliant idea to harness the resources and support of her friends, take them to market with her, have them purchase the clothing that would be sold at the remaining store and take a commission of the sales. She utilized this buying technique to remain in business and keep her clothing inventory fresh, all while continuing to design and sew her own creations at night. Eventually, Pat realized that her own designs would sell much faster and usually the day after she put them on the racks, and that this pure profit was much more lucrative. Thus, Designs by Pat was born, and in 1991 she decided to sell the store, hire a few buyers for the raw materials and concentrate 100% on designing.

"I strongly feel that if you package the outside of the body in happiness, the inside will follow," states Ms. Dahnke, and chose to live this statement as she and her daughter continued to heal and grow the business. She truly feels that if you will take the time to dress up and feel good about your appearance, the good feeling will begin to radiate outward.

Pat continued to sew her designs until the old machine started to skip a stitch, and her creativity kicked in to overcome this glitch. She began to cut out little leather leaves to stitch over the seams of the collars she was sewing, and this design feature has since become her signature piece. She was again faced with adversity and with strength and determination, had overcome another obstacle.

Another passion that speaks to Pat is embodied in her love of horses. Pat grew up with horses and feels a connection to the animals as she rides and cares for them. She began riding again with her daughter as an outlet to the long hours she was putting into her growing business, and this passion has endured to this day. She and her daughter, Tara, now in her early 30's, have joined the Salt Grass Trail Ride, every year for the past 23 years. The Salt Grass Trail Ride is a seven-day event to kick-off the annual Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. It reenacts the trail ride of the pioneer cattlemen from Brenham to Houston, Texas. Pat also has a son named Kirk, who has been in restaurant management, in Houston for many years. "I am extremely proud of my children," she states, and the glimmer in her eyes as she speaks of them attests to this.

"The best place for the inside of the body, is on the outside of a horse," claims Pat. Living up to this belief, Pat and her daughter now run Rainbows End Ranch in Waller, Texas.

"Rainbows End is named after the rainbows that Kent sent to me after he died." Tara runs this horse training business on the same ranch that Dahnke now manufactures all of her clothing and accessories. "We share the love of horses and enjoy many happy hours on the trail."

As for the inspiration and direction of her fashion line, Pat strives to design clothing and accessories for women that "work in the triangle" of a woman's figure. Regardless of whether you have a perfect figure or not-so-perfect figure, Pat's designs address the need to balance out the triangles with clothes that fit. She utilizes the concept of having the 'shoulder pads' on the outside, which makes hips look slimmer by widening the shoulders. Her designs are usually cut on the bias, accentuating the natural curves of a woman's body and tend to lay on the body in a more flattering way.

Recently featured at an intimate fashion show at the Trois Estate at Enchanted Rock, near Fredericksburg, Dahnke described her designs as "Victorian Cowgirl" with a very feminine feel. This style emerged at the height of the "Titanic" popularity in the early 90's, and coincided with the closing of the store and her full-time attention to designing. Even today, Dahnke's designs utilize luxurious fabrics, that "melt in your hand", which are then hand dyed to accentuate the highs and lows of the surface texture. Her garments can be dressed up with heels for a more formal look, or paired with cowboy boots for that perfect "cattle baroness" image.

Celebrity fans of Pat Dahnke's designs include Tanya Tucker, Lacy J. Dalton and Reba McEntyre to name a few. Her designs are true wearable art, and she prides herself on being a true American designer.

"With most American manufacturers turning to China for their production, I take pride in using American," and more specifically, "Texan labor. I pay Social Security and withholding taxes like a proud American. A business is as strong as its employees, and Jan Kittrell is my manager and great at taking care of production and shipping, when I am on the road." Seamstresses include Alma Horn, Irasema McCoy, Linda Young and Rosa Aguilera. All have been with Dahnke for five years and some as long as 14 years. "I now spend most of my time selling, marketing and designing, and almost every item is made on the ranch in Waller, Texas" by these wonderful associates.

Dahnke's designs are currently sold in over 300 upscale boutiques throughout the country, but perhaps her most successful designs have been her hipster belts. These wide, gorgeous belts are definitely the center of attention to any outfit. She designs them to be reversible with colorful acid washed or distressed, animal hide prints on one side, and a more neutral leather on the other. The belts come with wild ankle-length fringe that can be worn to dress up a pair of jeans, or accented with rhinestone, leather or short fringed trim to add panache to any outfit, even a business suit. Each belt comes with a beautiful magnetic broach that holds the belt in place on the hips and can be interchanged to create many different looks. These belts are quickly becoming a must-have piece to any well-dressed woman's wardrobe.

Sitting down with Pat Dahnke is a soothing experience. She has the wise calmness of a sage, and her confident yet settled demeanor lets you know that you are in the presence of a woman at peace with herself. She truly knows who she is and you get the sense that she wants to translate that inner peace to other women through her beautiful and inspiring designs.

* See Pat's designs at www.designsbypat.com