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## Fashion and Accessories Designer

BEFORE “MOB WIVES” and the whole money thing in the 80s, you didn’t tell people that your father was a mobster; a member of a notorious Jewish Mafia based in Detroit. When he went to jail for the first time when I was nine, my mother told us to tell everyone he was in the army. But everyone knew the truth. They avoided my sisters and me at school. I don’t remember having friends. I just remember my screams and cries when we had to say goodbye to him at the Federal Penitentiary in Mylan, Michigan after visiting hours were over.

“I want my daddy!” I screamed as the iron gates closed behind me.

The bars were drill bits that bore a hole deep inside me that gaped and despaired all the way back to Detroit. The hole became a hunger; a hunger to make it.

That was the first of four stints of increasing duration that my father did while I was growing up, the last one being for eight-and-a-half years. It was painful. I still remember him as a beautiful man, though. I was Daddy’s girl.

My first ‘job’ when I was twelve was collecting money for him from a guy called ‘Candy;’ a tall, squarely built man with salt and pepper hair and dark glasses, always impeccably dressed in an expensive-looking suit. It was my job to stash the money until my father told me what to do with it. I never knew exactly what was going on. I just did as my father asked.

As we were growing up, my mother always told my sisters and me that if you really want something, you have to work for it, and we all did. All four of us have successful businesses today in real estate and the beauty industry. I’m a fashion designer: accessories and garments.

I remember when I decided to come to New York. My family had moved from Detroit to Florida, supposedly for my father’s heart condition. In reality—I later learned—it was

because at the time Florida was the drug capital of the continent. We lived high there, in a big house with a Rolls Royce, maids, butlers, the whole bit. It was crazy.

But when I was down there, I kept meeting all these tourists from New York and there was something about them...They all had this schmooze-y, 'I-don't-give-a-shit,' street vibe that I identified with, and made me want to move there. I just had this sense that New York was a place where I could be creative and make it, and I did.

Being creative and making up crazy outfits was something I did naturally, from when I was a kid. I loved it: rolled-up pants with striped socks, lots of accessories, and creative hairstyles—and I would go out like that. My mom would ask, "Where are you getting this from?" But I've always had my own sense of style. Today I'd describe it as BoHo Chic.

My professional journey started when I got to New York in my early twenties, and I was working wholesale and retail for places like XOXO, BCBG, and Donna Dora. I noticed all these people working on the street selling jewelry and accessories and I was intrigued by all the colors and the creativity.

One day I just decided to do it. I brought a table down to the SoHo Street near my apartment and started making necklaces out of leather and shells. They were unique. People stopped to look, and they bought! I made more money that day than I did at my regular job. So, I turned one table into four and before I knew it, I was making a thousand dollars a table. I loved it! It became an obsession, and soon I had my own jewelry company and was selling to stores across the country.

Today you can see my accessories on television and in magazines, worn by celebrities like Thea Andrews on *The Insider*, Cristina Ferrare on *Home and Family*, Catt Sadler on *E! News*, model Kelly Bensimon and more.

When I was just starting out with the accessories, I created a leather handbag for myself. It was just what I wanted—slouchy and hippy-ish, with lots of pockets. I had it with me one day when I was working my table. A woman from Fragment's Showroom happened by and zeroed in on it. She admired it and I could tell she was really interested. At the time, Fragments was *the* showroom to be in. She asked me where I got it and I told her I designed it myself and figured out how to get it made according to my

specifications at a factory in the garment district. I could tell from her expression that she was really impressed. We kept talking about it, and how we could make different versions of it with more and fewer pockets.

Finally, we struck a deal and soon we were collaborating on mass producing this bag, which was then featured in Fragment's showroom. From there it was picked up by Bergdorf's (where it was the 'It' bag of the season), Anthropologie, Fred Siegel, Henry Bendel, and even Wink, a store at the famous W Hotels. After being in all the best stores, people in the business knew my name and it wasn't a problem to get them to consider my product in the future.

Even though the bag was doing great, the profit margin was slim, so I decided to go overseas to see if I could get it produced for less money. I went to Italy and India, but I couldn't find anyone who could make my bag. While I was in India, though, I happened into this little, family-owned store with typical India-style garments. I was fascinated by the beadwork I saw on them. It was just amazing; meticulous! An idea started forming in my mind and I approached the owners and complimented them on the beautiful beadwork. They thanked me and invited me to their home for lunch and then took me to their factory.

It was a huge, hot, and crowded room, where somewhere between thirty to fifty men worked at cutting boards and sewing machines. Women worked at a table doing the beadwork. Off to one side was a rack with samples of the clothing they produced.

There was a typical Indian style tunic with straight sleeves, sewn up to the neck—very conservative—but the beadwork was stunning. I spoke to the woman beside me and told her what I envisioned, opening up the neck and making the sleeves bell-shaped. She called over a patternmaker and he started making notes and sketches as we spoke. When he was done, I could see they understood perfectly what I wanted.

We struck a deal for them to start producing what became my signature tunic; a garment that can go from beach to boogie and has been worn by celebrities like Beyonce (on the cover of *Self Magazine*), Zoe Saldano, Kourtney Kardashian and so many more. It was also featured as the *first* cover-up in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition.

The tunic, to put it mildly, went viral. That got me into garments in general, and now I have my own clothing line as well, which includes dresses, caftans, rompers, and even

wedding dresses. I see celebrities wearing my clothes on the runway, on television, and in magazines.

I'm proud of what I've achieved, but I always return to my roots: selling accessories on the street at a table on the corner of Spring and West Broadway in SoHo. That's where you'll find me on most sunny days, talking to people, showing them my stuff, selling, observing, and learning.

The only thing that put a dent in my career was an abusive relationship that lasted six and a half years. Being put down daily really had an impact on my self-esteem and my ability to succeed. But when I woke up from that and found a partner who supported me and loved me no matter what, I got myself back. Now I'm back on my feet and back on the street, doing well, telling people off who deserve to be told off, but also getting the greatest high from making people feel super amazing after I've styled them.

The other hard thing for me in the past few years was when my father passed away in 1999 at the age of sixty-five, just two years after he got out of prison and just when he was making the decision to live clean. We were both formed by the street, him and me, and we both made money by listening to the rhythms of the street. But the street told him a different story.

From my perspective, there's an art to the street; music and life and people of every size, shape, and color. It feeds me, forms me, and inspires me to bring it all together to produce beautiful things that will dress the story and keep it going. I take from the street, but I also give back to the street. It's a dance, punctuated by the occasional flipped table and crushing exchange, but you 'gotta be in it to win it. You 'gotta ask yourself, "How hungry are you?"

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