



Hippie Chic

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Jamie Levin would probably tell you that a spiritual convergence is responsible for the success of her line of tie-dyed clothing she calls Spiritually High Dye.

While she's been at it for more than 15 years, it wasn't until last year, as her mother lay dying of ovarian cancer in Levin's hometown of Chicago, that sales began to soar. Her mother, Gail Rouske, died last March.

Out of a tiny warehouse studio in North Miami, Levin produces between 200 and 250 pieces of clothing each week. Her work is sold in Chicago and South Florida. But don't look for it in head shops or those \$6.99 bikini stores on the beach, the usual depots for what to some is an anachronistic clothing style.

Instead, Levin's line is sold in high-end suburban women's boutiques in Plantation, Parkland and Boca Raton.

What makes her clothing unique is that Levin tie-dyes not just oversize T-shirts, but also capri pants, one-shouldered tanks, even thong panties in high-quality cotton. Retail prices range from about \$45 for a spaghetti tank to \$75 for fleece yoga pants. Children's clothing ranges from \$36 to \$40.

Levin starts with black fabric and then applies color via a process she keeps secret. The result is a new kind of tie-dye, sophisticated and suitable for buyers of any age, for men, women and kids. Yoga devotees, stay-at-home moms and grandparents wear her work.

Levin's process starts at home, where she likes to tie the clothing using four sizes of elastic bands. She'll tie anywhere from 60 to 150 pieces in one sitting. Before any dye is applied, she washes the items as part of her secret process.

"Then I'll go to the studio and go on a marathon of dyeing. I would say in full production I can be there about three full days a week."

Unlike other tie-dyers, she applies color by hand instead of simply immersing the clothing in buckets of dye. She's in the process of teaching two assistants.

"After we're finished, we cut the rubber bands and lay [the clothing] out in the sun to dry. Then they get washed and labeled."

While much tie-dye is poorly made and lacking in detail, Levin began her career in women's retail and insists on both quality and style. Her color combinations go by names such as ocean, earth and patriotic.

"These are my Peter Tosh/Bob Marley colors," she says of another combination of colors. "They're very green if you get my drift."

Tie-dye may have been born in the counterculture of the '60s, but in Levin, 42, the art has found a modern advocate, someone who's style-savvy yet remains true to her ideals.

Levin is a Deadhead, one of thousands whose lives have been changed by their association with rock band the Grateful Dead.

For outsiders, the band may seem to have been nothing more than a reason to do hallucinogenic drugs. But for Levin, who attended her first show in 1980, the Deads and the audience they attracted were the big, extended, unconditionally loving family she never had as a child. Her parents divorced when she was 10.

"I'm a living breathing representation of what they stood for. It offends me when people say that all the Grateful Dead were was drugs," she says. "We know that we were the fortunate ones."

To those who never knew the band, Levin says: "I'm so sorry that you weren't able to have the experience. You've missed so much."

Her experience with the band forms a kind of foundation for her life, from being "spiritually bankrupt" and not knowing who she was to becoming a spiritual person, a "proud hippie," an artist and a single mother raising daughter Bella Song Mazzetti, 9, on her own. Bella, a fourth-grader at Central Park Elementary School in Plantation, is on the principal's honor roll.

"My spirituality is about acceptance and love," says Levin, who came to tie-dye after being an acupuncture therapist. "I felt like I was at temple when I was at a Grateful Dead concert. I'm a real hippie and I'm proud of it because what I represent is what everybody needs in the world."

The fact that the country is preparing for war and her Vietnam era clothing line is taking off isn't lost on Levin. "We're going back to what we needed then," she says.

Levin lost count of how many Grateful Dead concerts she attended after she hit 100. There are stories from every concert, but it was when she met a member of the Grateful Dead entourage that her life began to take shape. At a concert in 1988, she was invited backstage by Billy Grillo, roadie to Deads drummer Bill Kreutzmann. They fell in love and planned to marry. Her engagement ring was a laminated all-access pass. But they parted ways about a year later.

After the break-up, she moved to South Florida where her father and grandmother had moved. After enduring several lean financial years, Spiritually High Dye took off.

"She could be as big as she wanted to be," says Rhonda Agatstein, co-owner of She's With It, a contemporary women's clothing boutique in Plantation. Agatstein orders 20 pieces at a time. "We bring it in every two weeks or so and we sell it out."

For Diane Boothroyd, owner of To Di For, a women's boutique in Parkland, Spiritually High Dye sells because it's unique. "You don't usually see tie-dye on black. No two are the same. You order four of the rainbow tie-dye and none of them are the same."

Boothroyd alerts certain customers when Levin's clothing arrives, and each order sells out.

Levin views her success and her work as just one more part of her spiritual journey that began with the Grateful Dead. "I am extremely grateful," has always been one of her favorite expressions. But with the success of Spiritually High Dye, she's been saying it a lot more.

Folks who wear her tie-dye claim to feel better when they wear it. Some, including Levin, say warriors, charkas and extraterrestrials can be seen in the design of her clothing.

"I know I'm doing more than just dyeing black fabric," she says. "I like to say that what I do is bring light through darkness."

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