Christina Aguilera, Gwen Stefani, Salma Hayek and Heidi Klum all have one. Oprah Winfrey presented one to Julia Roberts during an Oprah show. Even Sheryl Crow sings its praises.

New moms and dads no longer need to suffer the embarrassment of schlepping around baby’s dull drab diaper bag. At Petunia Pickle Bottom headquarters in Ventura, two Cal Poly alumni—and one CSU Chico alumna—are creating diaper bags elegant enough to call works of art.

DeNai Jones (LS ’97; CRED ’98), her husband, Braden Jones (BUS ’99), and Korie Conant, a Chico public relations grad, are bringing style and high fashion to the diaper bag industry.

It all started while on an extended trip to Alaska, where the couple had time to explore their career options. “We had no mortgage, no children. It was the right time to take a risk, to pursue our goals of building a business,” Braden said.

His first challenge was to convince a “totally risk-averse” Denai, who thought a teaching career would offer security, a regular paycheck and summers off.

When the couple returned to Ventura, they got right down to it. Denai did everything by hand. In a room above her parents’ garage, she traced the patterns and cut them out. She soon found a store in Santa Barbara that she knew would be a good fit for the high-end diaper bags she was designing.

Denai and Braden launched the Petunia Pickle Bottom line in 2000. Until then diaper bags were just functional, portable changing stations. There were no fashionable, functional diaper bags. Everything was geared toward the baby, not the mother, Denai said.

“We started out slowly, from scratch. Soon our bags were appearing in celebrity magazines,” Denai said. “It got to the point where I couldn’t cut them fast enough. So we risked it … we took out a personal loan for $30,000 and had a few hundred units made.”

As business grew, they realized they needed someone to help market their product. They brought Korie on board as vice president and director of brand development. The three of them worked for years with no pay. “Korie worked as a waitress at night. We were totally boot-strapping this thing,” Denai said.

The company now employs nearly 20 and distributes to more than 1,200 retail outlets nationally and internationally. Their bags, ranging in price from $150 to $325, are sold in high-end baby boutiques and stores such as Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue.

But Denai and Braden recall more humble days. “In the beginning, we had to create a façade larger than we were. We didn’t want people to know we were working out of a room above our parents’ garages. We had one phone with nine extensions, and family members who would answer, ‘This is John in shipping.’ We subscribed to the theory: ‘Fake it ’til you make it.’”

After five years, Denai is finally getting to do what she loves—designing. “I always wanted to focus on just the design aspect of the job, but I was busy packing boxes, putting out fires, making phone calls.”

Their creative line includes a masculine bag designed for dads, several styles of bags for moms, and a smaller clutch bag. They recently launched the Cake line, an upper-end line described as “deliciously decadent; a moveable feast in rich European cut velvets and wool tweeds, sculpted antique brass hardware and timeless, functional design.” They also sell the Fawn line of high-end baby bedding.

Petunia Pickle Bottom headquarters is the kind of place that nurtures creativity. A large loft-like space with wood floors, high ceilings, huge windows and a view of the Pacific, the offices are open and airy and light. “We’ll pay a little extra for a good working environment,” Braden said. “We want it to feel like family.”

And no wonder. Both Denai and Braden have nothing but the highest praise for their families, especially their parents. “Our parents supported us all the way,” Braden said. “They gave us strong foundations. You can’t jump far without a good foundation.”

What’s next? “We want to expand the brand, make it more noteworthy,” Braden said. “We want to grow the company, too. We’re on the next five-year plan, which includes multi-product launches in the baby industry.”

And multi-baby launches, as well. Denai and Braden are the proud parents of two-year-old Sutton and are awaiting the arrival of a second son in March. Korie had a boy last October.
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