

SOLE SISTER

Susan Hassett's fashionable Cocktail Sneakers a real kick

BY BILL BROTHERTON

Four years ago, Susan Hassett was on Nantucket with a few of her friends. The guys were playing golf, so the girls enjoyed a fun day out, poking through boutiques and sipping wine.

She forgot her sneakers. So, at some point, she suggested they go to a shoe store so she could buy a pair. The selection was good, she said, as long as you wanted gym sneakers in white.

Frustrated, she blurted out "All I'm looking for at this time of day is cocktail sneakers." The whole store erupted in laughter and applause.

An idea was born.

Today, Hassett's company, Cocktail Sneakers, is one of the nation's rising footwear enterprises.

"Men can wear fashionable, cool sneakers all day. But not women. I felt there was a lack of feminine sensibility in sneakers. Gym shoes don't look good with that little skirt," she said. "Working women wear high heels all day, then put sneakers on to run to the train. I thought, 'Wow. What if I could make a sneaker that's a little more feminine looking, a sneaker that a woman can wear from morning to night. What if a woman could go to a cocktail party and wear a cute pair of sneakers to go with that little dress.'"

"It's about the femininity," she said. "We are redefining sneaker culture."

Hassett, 62, is sharing her success story while relaxing in her Doaks Lane office. Hooper, her 15-year-old Portuguese Water Dog, keeps us company. She and her husband, John, have lived in Marblehead for all 36 years of their marriage. They have two sons, Chris, 30, and Lucas, 28. "I had no background in shoes," she said. "But I've always had quirky ideas."

Although she loves fashion and



Susan Hackett, founder of Marblehead-based Cocktail Sneakers, supports the Soles4Souls charity, which donates shoes to families in need. Her vehicle is filled with shoes donated by North Shore residents.

watches trends, Hassett wondered "How is a woman like me from little Marblehead, Mass., going to create a brand of sneakers?" Where to begin? She read online about Keiko Hirose, who owns and runs a coworking space for shoemakers in Brooklyn, N.Y. Her husband encouraged her. "Get yourself to Brooklyn and meet her," he urged.

"By myself? I'm too old," she replied. "No you're not. Do it." So, she did.

She hopped on an Amtrak train at South Station, got to New York City and nervously made her way to Brooklyn Shoe Space. "They didn't know me from Adam. They could have said 'no' and sent me on my way. But they helped this older woman who had an idea." Much later, Hassett asked Hirose why she didn't give her the brush-off. "Susan, I could see it (the determination to succeed) in your eyes."

She was next introduced to designer Mar Espanol, of Shoe Girls Studio in

Brooklyn, who in turn steered her toward a woman-run, woman-owned factory in China, a rare thing in East Asia. Then a marketing team led by Daniella Vollinger and a creative/branding firm signed up. Cocktail Sneakers was up and running, and all participants were women.

"I did not set out to have an all-female team," said Hassett, who at first worked from her home on Harbor View Lane. Eventually, she rented office and storage space on Doaks Lane.

Her husband, a successful businessman as well, one day told Susan it was crucial for her to visit the factory where her sneakers would be manufactured. We're talking Dongguan, smack dab in the middle of China, a place she had never been to.

"It was not on my bucket list," she said.

"I went to China by myself. I was 61 years old at the time, and let me tell you, my heart skipped a beat. My husband walked me to the gate at LaGuardia ... and off I went."

When her plane landed, a van driver was waiting at the Hong Kong airport. But as they approached the China border, the driver said, "Miss Susan. I cannot drive you over. I have to pick you up on the other side."



Hassett laughs at the memory. "I said to myself, 'OK, Susan. You have your passport, a cell phone, money ... you can do it.' It made going to Brooklyn, NY, seem like a little walk to Shubie's." She and the van driver reconnected and they were off to the factory. Five days of intensive work followed. Plans were finalized for Cocktail Sneakers' initial launch, in June 2018, and a total of 1400 pair of fashionable, comfortable sneakers were to be manufactured in four styles and seven colors.

Cocktail Sneakers are sold online and at boutiques across the country, and at Canyon Ranch in Lenox, at the Ritz-Carlton in Santa Barbara, Calif., the St.

Regis in Aspen, Colo., and other swanky spots. They sell for \$195-\$225 per pair.

The 2020 styles will be introduced this month.

Hassett also believes in giving back. There's a plaque near her desk that posits: "What would Oprah do?" and that partially explains the charitable part of Cocktail Sneakers. She's helped Soles4Souls, whose mission is to "wear out poverty" and create jobs. This year, 6.5 million pairs of shoes were donated to families in all 50 states and in 27 countries. The Marblehead community offered support, letting Hassett set up donation spaces at National Grand Bank downtown, at Kernwood Country Club and the Marblehead-Swampscott YMCA. Hassett said donation boxes and bags were overflowing at all three sites. More than 500 pairs of "slightly used" shoes for men, women and children were donated.

"Many women at my age feel they still have something to offer. For a while, I thought I was too old to start this sneakers business. But everyone offered encouragement. My sons said, 'Go mom' and they're always asking their friends 'Are you following my mom on Instagram?'"



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