

The Creators: Main Line leather goods startup looks to expand, grow talent pipeline



Lance Mobley with one of his Atelier 56 bags in his workspace at Byrum's Shoe Repair.
Joseph Mobley

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[Lance Mobley](#) didn't have designs on working in leather goods, much less creating his own brand. But that's what happened after he took up an apprenticeship at a Main Line shoe repair shop seven years ago.

Five years after formally launching Atelier 56, Mobley is looking to add new products to his line and establish a training program so that he can pass skills onto the next generation in much the same way he learned his craft.

In 2016, Mobley, who hails from Coatesville, got a tip that the owner of Byrum's Shoe Service in Malvern was looking for help in the shop. Mobley had no related experience – he was previously a visual merchandiser for home goods and furniture brands Crate & Barrel and Ethan Allen – but decided to give it a go. At the shop – which has been in business five decades – Mobley got a crash course in leatherworking from Byrum Swiggett.

“He's taught me every single thing from resoling to putting heels on to doing rips in the bags to installing luggage zippers, doing wheels,” said Mobley.

Despite the name, Byrum's repairs more than just shoes. All manner of leather goods are brought to the shop, including luggage and handbags. It was one such item that piqued Mobley's interest. When a high-end designer bag was left at the shop for a while, Mobley began studying it, curious about the construction and materials. As he did, he began wondering if he could construct a bag himself.

That sparked an idea for what would become his brand, Atelier 56, which he launched in 2018, the same year he sold his first bag. He spent the two years in between learning everything he could, including different leather weights, how to cut patterns and make handles.



Mobley working on a bag for Atelier 56.
Joseph Mobley

Aside from the sewing skills he picked up as a middle school student, Mobley learned other craft trades in the shop – which is located at 81 Lancaster Ave. in the Great Valley Shopping Center – from Swiggett or by teaching himself. In the early days, he would come to the shop early, stay late or come in on days off to fine tune his skills, something the Covid-19 pandemic gave him even more time to focus on.

“I took that time [and] used it wisely to do that,” Mobley said.

It wasn’t long before he began building out the brand, adding new bags and other leather goods. After his first bag, he went on to design what he called the Murphy bag, which he offered in three colors and has since expanded from the original medium size to two additional sizes – a weekender and a mini. The bags are ideal for travel or as an overnight bag, Mobley said.

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Like with the Murphy, his design process often starts with considering his own needs. The Murphy came about when Mobley was taking a quick trip to Florida and wanted a carry on for the plane.

The name of the Murphy was a nod to Hall of Fame jockey Isaac Burns Murphy, who won the Kentucky Derby three times in his career in the late 1800s. Being located in Malvern means the shop sees no shortage of equestrians, which piqued Mobley’s interest.

Today, Atelier 56 sells crossbodies, duffels, handbags, tote bags, and pen sleeves with a focus on leather goods. Bag prices range from \$180 for a crossbody up to \$750 for an extra-large weekend bag.

Many of Mobley’s designs are intentionally non-gendered so they can appeal to any consumer, though he does offer some handbags tailored toward women.



Image: Theodore Samuels

The Murphy duffel comes in three sizes. The medium, pictured, retails for \$480.
Theodore Samuels

While Mobley has started exclusively selling a selection of his goods at Byrum's, the majority of sales, 75%, come from online. It's also where he is focusing most of his marketing and offers the full collection. Sales so far are largely concentrated in the states surrounding Pennsylvania, but have come from as far as North Carolina.

His best seller is the tote bag and he is working on new product development including a new handbag and a ripstop nylon gym bag. Mobley is also exploring other materials coated canvas or vinyl.

As he continues to grow the brand, Mobley is considering other retail partnerships, especially with small and independently owned stores. Whatever happens, he plans to continue on at Byrum's. Their partnership is also morphing into a form of succession planning for the business, with Mobley planning to take over day to day operations when Swiggett is ready to retire.

Being around the shop's customers has also been beneficial for Mobley. "It allows me to see both sides of how people are using their items ... and how I can possibly make things a little bit better," he said of his design process.

More than making bags, he also wants to educate consumers. Interacting with customers coming in for repairs, he's seen how there's a lack of connection between consumer, creator and material, especially when it comes to name brands.

"[Consumers] buy a product and they think because they spent \$2,000 for it it's going to hold up.... I'm really focused on letting people know exactly what you're buying," he said. "It's important to me. Maybe it's important to others, too, that they know that it's coming from an actual person. And it's local."

To that end, Mobley works to source materials made in the U.S., including leather hides from Pennsylvania and hardware made in Connecticut.

In addition to educating consumers, Mobley wants to create a talent pipeline through apprenticeships, "just how I was, because I like the idea that you're able to get hands on [training]," he said. "You may not run a shoe shop later, you may not work in a shoe shop, but you always have that experience."

And maybe like it has with Mobley it will lead to new startups.