

THE MICHIGAN CLOSET

U-M designers are ready to dress you, but not just in Maize and Blue.

BY JENN MCKEE, '93



We know our alumni work in every profession, but only recently did we learn just how many graduates are making a name for themselves in the fashion industry—thanks to some truly innovative business models.

On these pages, we highlight a few success stories and showcase some of their products. To add just another fun U-M layer, we invited staff from the Alumni Association (and some of their extremely well-behaved children) to model the clothing and accessories. We then captured them on campus at some of our favorite spots. (Guess where if you can!)

BIGGER IS BETTER

Before Katie Kozloff, '03, launched her high-end, size-inclusive (2-26) line of active wear called Katie K., she created a line of screen-printed underwear. The young entrepreneur quickly noticed that the larger sizes sold the fastest. Later, working as a personal trainer and listening to women complain about the lack of sharp, larger-size workout clothes, she came up with her next idea. In 2011, she launched Taffy, a line of plus-size active wear that was successful enough to be sold at T.J. Maxx and Marshalls. Yet in the end, the product was not good enough for Kozloff. "I just thought, 'This isn't exactly what I want.' I wanted to make higher-end clothing, use better fabrics, and create more stylish designs."

In 2014, she launched the Katie K Active collection with a focus on quality, construction, color, and fit for women of all sizes. (Six months later, she closed down Taffy.) "Everyone should be able to look good and pursue an active lifestyle," says Kozloff. The producers of "The Biggest Loser" agreed. Last year, they ordered 200 pairs of Kozloff's sporty

capris, which a number of contestants wore during the last season. “It was definitely very cool and exciting,” she says, “because they found us.”

IF THE SHIRT FITS

In the summer of 2014, former U-M hockey team co-captain Lee Moffie, '13, and fellow Wolverine Steven Fisher, '13, were rooming together in Ann Arbor when they discovered they had a common complaint.

“We got to talking about how we were both frustrated with every dress shirt we had, and from our frustration came the idea that maybe we could make something better,” says Fisher, who was working for the Detroit Tigers at the time. Moffie—a minor-league hockey player—was in town training during the off-season. The recent graduates were frustrated that, as men with athletic builds, they could never find button-down dress shirts that fit both their chest and waist.

“We were pretty naive at the time about how everything works, in terms of tailoring and what fabrics to use, but we got our feet under us pretty quickly,” Fisher recalls.

In the end, after much experimentation, they landed on a light, flexible, four-way stretch fabric (a nylon/polyester/spandex blend).

After tidying up the collars and cuffs with some stiffening fabric, they made the shirts odor resistant, machine washable, and wrinkle free to reflect the needs of businessmen on the road. Finally satisfied with the product, they launched the State & Liberty Clothing Co. in January 2015. Though its name conjures up a specific corner in Ann Arbor, for the moment the store is only online, yet it reflects a U-M state of mind.

CLOTHES FOR COLLEGE

David Merritt, '09, is probably best known for helping U-M reach the NCAA Basketball Tournament in 2009, after a lengthy 11-year dry spell. But there are other reasons to admire Merritt these days, beyond his work as a commentator for Michigan basketball radio. He is now the founder of Merit, a Detroit-based philanthropic fashion line he started in 2012. Twenty percent of the revenue from the company's clothing and accessory sales go toward his nonprofit FATE. In turn, that money is put toward college scholarships for Detroit's underserved youth.

Matching Merritt's own aesthetic, the fashion products he sells—which include T-shirts, sweaters, and hats—are all decidedly casual. “If I could wear sweats and a hoodie on a daily basis, I would,” he says. “I can't do that. But I wanted items that were versatile, done in cool, casual fabrics that you can wear in different settings and still feel good.”

Each item also comes with a Merit badge of service to highlight the positive impact of each purchase for FATE students. Merritt's FATE program offers support and counseling to students from ninth grade through high school graduation. That could be why each of the first 22 FATE students to complete the program has had at least one college acceptance.

“It's awesome,” says Merritt. “The students have taught us just as much as we have taught them.”

Opposite page: Nevin Fisher, copywriter, sits outside Tappan Hall sporting a Merit T-shirt promoting the nonprofit FATE. **Below left:** Marketing manager Jennifer Janssen, MS'08, is ready to work out at the Central Campus Recreation Building in Katie K. **Below right:** Carlos Martinez, '09, global engagement manager, dresses for success in a State & Liberty shirt outside the Law School.





Top, left: Student employee and U-M senior Cherie Chen kicks back on the Diag with senior travel program coordinator Erica Selesky, both sporting Skicks shoes. Top right: Michigan Alumnus assistant editor Gregory Lucas-Myers, '10, takes a break in front of the Hatcher Graduate Library in a Merit T-shirt. Below left and right: Justin Clark (nephew of Michigan Alumnus editor Sharon Morioka, '84, MA'86) and Rosie Feighan (daughter of Anne Feighan, vice president of marketing) frolic outside the Museum of Natural History wearing Plae shoes.

KIDS ROCK

Years ago, an executive recruiter for Nike called the athletic shoe designer Ryan Ringholz, '97, to discuss whether he might join the company and oversee the children's shoe division.

Having worked with elite professional athletes and high-end fashion designers, Ringholz felt his skills were above children's footwear. But not for long. "Later that day, I walked into my house and saw my kids playing on the floor," says Ringholz. "I'm a dad who couldn't care about anything in the world more than my kids. I suddenly had this realization: 'I'm a shoe designer. Why don't I care more about my kids' shoes?'"

Ringholz then built Plae shoes from scratch, consulting with experts about the anatomy of growing feet for nearly two years before finally launching the shoe company in 2013. "Kids' feet are mostly cartilage," Ringholz says. "Their feet are still forming, the bones are still fusing, until they reach adulthood. Whatever shape you put a kid's foot in, the foot will take on that shape. So then it becomes really important to have a platform that provides support without unduly hindering the development of the foot."

Ringholz knew that the shoes had to be able to withstand rugged, muddy, outdoor play while also being fun and colorful. And he wanted to find a way to customize the shoes. He did so by making the straps interchangeable in an array of colors and patterns. Early prototypes were tested by Ringholz's 11-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter. "They were free guinea pigs," jokes Ringholz. Now they, no doubt, have a lot of free shoes.

GO SKICKS!

Jordana Schrage, '16, had her shoe business, Skicks, up and running before she graduated from U-M. In fact, her company's roots stem back to her high school years growing up in Florida. "I started drawing on my shoes for fun," she recalls. "Then I did it for friends and family and other people."

Upon arriving at U-M, Schrage noticed that hard-core Wolverine fans had branded gear from head to ankle, but were lacking matching footwear. "It just seemed like such a great idea. There aren't many shoes on the market that you can wear to games and tailgates to represent your school," she says. To test the market, she made a pair of U-M shoes her sophomore year and posted them on Instagram. In no time, people wanted to buy them. But there was one obstacle. She needed a license agreement with the University to produce the shoes.

It did not take long for U-M to give her permission to use the Block M or for M Den to stock her sneakers. In fact, anticipating U-M's approval, M Den preordered the sneakers and put them on the shelves the moment she launched the brand in August 2014.

Her company, based in Boca Raton, Fla., now has license agreements with more than 75 colleges. What's more, her line has expanded to include custom-designed sneakers for celebri-

ties like Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez, Ariana Grande, Nick Cannon, and Pink. Apparently, all kinds of people now want to put themselves in Schrage's shoes.

SCULPTING WITH STONES

Instead of making it big, artist Rebecca Zemans, '03, makes it small—in the form of rings, pendants, brooches, bracelets, and more. To her, the pieces are "small sculptures."

Zemans first experimented with jewelry while studying metalsmithing and cultural anthropology at U-M. But by her senior year, she had ventured into large-scale sculptures. But four years after graduating, when she discovered her artistic home in Chicago's Lillstreet Arts Center, her interest shifted. The center had a jewelry facility, making her think, "Why don't I bring my work down to the scale where I started?" The following year, she launched her online business, Rebecca Zemans: Sculptural Designs in Jewelry.

Zemans' line is now a range of wedding and engagement rings, as well as pieces she creates from customers' old jewelry, repurposing the metals and stones into new designs. The work makes her feel like she has finally married her two fields of study at U-M.

"There's a form of a wedding ceremony in every culture, and as a metalsmith, by making rings, you are part of that human ritual. And with the legality of gay marriage, there's a whole other level of intimacy, designing for two men or for two women," she says. "It's fun to be able to honor everyone's beliefs and ways of life."



Sarah Stachak, assistant director of annual giving, leadership gifts, sparkles in Rebecca Zemans' jewelry outside the U-M Museum of Art.

Jenn McKee, '93, worked for more than a decade as a staff arts reporter for The Ann Arbor News. She is now a freelance writer whose work has appeared in The Detroit Free Press, The Detroit News, The Ann Arbor Observer, Literary Mama, and other publications.