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Scarsdale teen creates change through clothing

By AMY BOCHNER
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Sofia Feinstein, 17, started her company to give back to causes close to her heart.

Amy Bochner Photo

More than 3,500 pairs of fuzzy pajamas, graphic T-shirts and colorful leggings sit in neatly stacked piles on a folding table — each item brand new and never worn. This isn't a department store, but 17-year-old Sofia Feinstein's basement, and all of these clothes will be donated to charity.

This massive donation of clothing is only the most recent milestone for Feinstein, a Scarsdale High School senior. Atop a separate counter are sweatshirts and tote bags of various designs, most emblazoned with the words "UNI-T Fashion," the name of Feinstein's clothing company that donates all of the profits to charity. The name "UNI-T" represents not only the objective of a company three years in the making, but also the unifying effect this project has had on Sophia with her family's history.

The idea for UNI-T came to Feinstein in 2020. Combining her passions for fashion, community service and entrepreneurship, she decided to create a company that allowed her to design clothing, while also giving back to charity. Inspiration for how to set UNI-T up hit her while sitting at the kitchen table.

"My dad was eating a salad and had Paul Newman's salad dressing. I was reading the bottle and ... it said that all the profits from this salad dressing are donated to charity," Feinstein said. "I was like, wow. If Paul Newman's can do this, I'm inspired to do that as well."

The premise behind UNI-T Fashion is to take advantage of an existing market in order to raise money for charity.

"People are buying clothing all the time, and those profits just go to the companies," Feinstein said. "Why not have a company that does the same thing, except the profits go and help people?"

After a year of developing the idea, Feinstein began choosing products, which, she said, was the most difficult part of the process. She became obsessed with textiles. Her family recalled Sofia having them go through trials and trials to figure out which textiles and materials were the best.

"There [could be] pilling on T-shirts, T-shirts can shrink, T-shirts can become rougher. It was a very complicated process, and it made me realize how if a T-shirt can be this complicated, then its history must be complicated, too. I learned... something simple, just as simple as cotton, a plant, was basically the reason that a civil war happened in the United States."

Fascinated by what she discovered, Feinstein wrote a research paper on the history of cotton in 10th grade for a social studies class.



Amy Bochner Photo

“Everyone thought it was a very strange idea, my teacher was shocked. I knew I was interested in fashion. But then to choose cotton as a research paper was a bit unusual. It helped me with just starting this company, because I learned about how complicated it was and how much history is behind cotton, and how much history will be carried through my products. It was really cool to learn about it, because then it also just gives me more knowledge about what I’m selling.”

Not only did Sofia exhaustively research materials, she also spent months finding a supplier that matched her company’s needs and values. UNI-T fashion uses on-demand printing, which ensures that there are no leftover products going to waste. Sustainability and ethical production were factors in Sofia’s decision when choosing a supplier.

“The entire goal of UNI-T is to help people, so if the process of helping people involves harming people, that would almost defeat the whole purpose,” she said. “The entire message is to be united. If that involves supporting a system that is unethical, it just doesn’t make sense.”

Currently, UNI-T sells more than 70 pieces, from T-shirts to bags to sweatpants. Many feature Feinstein’s own designs, as well as designs that were enhanced using AI.



Amy Bochner Photo

Feinstein’s target for 2023 is \$15,000. All profits from the sale of these items go to three charities: Steve’s Camp at Horizon Farms, Inroads and HIAS. Steve’s Camp is a nonprofit that provides underserved youth from New York City a summer camp experience. Inroads provides pathways to careers for underrepresented high school and college students across the country. HIAS is an international organization that provides services to refugees and asylum seekers in more than 20 countries.

Sophia and her family's connection to HIAS goes back generations. Her great-grandfather, Maurice Hallivas, fled Cuba during Fidel Castro's communist revolution with the help of HIAS. He immigrated to Florida, where he set up a HIAS office in order to help other Cuban refugees get into the U.S. Learning about her family's history inspired Feinstein to follow in her great-grandfather's footsteps.

"Without [HIAS], I don't know where I would be, if I would even be here. HIAS played a huge role in my great-grandfather and grandfather's lives and, because of that, my mother was born, and now I'm here," Feinstein said. "I have a personal connection to HIAS, so I thought, why not try to partner with them and try to help? It's, in a way, paying back."

Upon visiting Cuba with her family when she was in seventh grade, Feinstein realized the disparity between her life in Scarsdale and the lives of people living in the place her great-grandfather came from.

"From that moment, I was like, wow, this is my history. I need to continue this legacy, making other people happy, making my grandfather and great-grandfather happy and making my ancestors happy."

One of Feinstein's goals is to spread UNI-T's reach beyond Westchester. Inspired by Girl Scouts, Sofia created the role of marketing ambassador to help middle and high school-aged kids get involved in the company.

"If you really think about it, who markets Girl Scout cookies? The kids are doing it. They're selling a product. What is the product? I mean, it's cookies, they're good cookies, but the Girl Scout cookies have been able to build such an amazing platform because of the way they market. That's how I'm basing the way UNI-T fashion is set up."

She also set up the role of a design collaborator for young people who want to help by sharing their art. Design collaborators help provide a variety of art styles to appeal to a greater number of consumers, while also giving students experience in designing real products.

"Although I love design, I have my own style and I want to attract a wide range of people," Feinstein said. "By having different designers, if someone likes one thing versus another, maybe a group of design collaborators can help me bring them in and show them why UNI-T is important."

From the early stages of UNI-T to now, Feinstein has received encouraging support from her community and beyond. Feinstein won the Scarsdale Fellowship for Social Entrepreneurs from the Scarsdale Schools Education Foundation in June, which boosted her confidence in the project.

“It proved to me that other people see the value in UNI-T,” she said.

This past month, UNI-T received a bundle of clothes from Dreamwear, a global clothing manufacturer, which donated 3,500 individual items of leftover stock to UNI-T, including products from brands such as Juicy Couture and PrettyLittleThing. Feinstein and the marketing ambassadors gathered in her basement to sift through the piles of never worn, brand name clothing.

The donation by Dreamwear took Feinstein by surprise.

“When making UNI-T, I didn’t think that this would happen,” she said. “I wouldn’t have ever believed that a company would want to help out in such a big way.”

Although the main focus of UNI-T is to sell clothes, Feinstein is more than happy to take donations.

“UNI-T’s 100% open to these types of donations because any help to my charities is amazing,” she said. “Never did I think this would happen, but now that it has, I’m interested in having more companies do this if they’re willing to and they see unity as an opportunity to donate stuff that can help my charities.”

Throughout the past three years, Feinstein has learned many lessons about creating and running a company.

“One of the most valuable things has always been, in school, learning from our mistakes and learning how to be better at something and how to improve,” she said. “You have to be open to that type of improvement and you have to be open to constructive criticism, especially in design [and] art.”

As she begins her senior year of high school, Feinstein looks forward to continuing UNI-T during college and after.

“It was a long process, but it’s all been worth it. I’ve made a company, but I’ve also learned so much. I’m continuing to learn, and I’m continuing to make UNI-T better.”