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SMALL BUSINESS

Sunglasses by women for women

BY KELSEY KUKAUA

From the beginning, Ashley Johnson wanted to build a business rooted in a social mission. She was greatly impacted by the documentary “Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide,” in which girls were being denied an education because of their gender. Now with each purchase of a pair of Mohala sunglasses, a deserving girl is sent to school for one week as a partner of Rooms to Read Girls’ Education Program. The program focuses on four core competencies: life skills, mentors, material support and community engagement.

“The fashion industry perpetuates the notion that a woman’s value is in her external beauty, but we want to go beyond that and look inward,” Johnson said. “The single most effective path for a girl in the developing world to escape the cruel cycle of childhood marriage, sex-trafficking, pre-teen pregnancy, HIV exposure and violence is education. By purchasing one pair, you are changing the world one week of school at a time.”

Johnson launched Mohala Eyewear 17 months ago on Oahu and Kauai, as well as in Japan. In the Hawaiian language, mohala means to bloom, to blossom, to shine and to be free. She said she chose sunglasses because she saw a niche in the market and an opportunity to offer women a product that was feminine, confident and socially responsible.

The company is woman-owned and operated, specializing in eyewear for women. According to Johnson, Mohala uses the highest-quality components such as premium Mazzacchelli acetate, German-engineered stainless-steel spring hinges and UV 400 lenses that are both impact and scratch-resistant.

In developing her product, Johnson researched the eyeglass market in Japan, where she found a significant difference in nose-bridge height between Japan- and



MOHALA EYEWEAR

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U.S.-made sunglasses. With this newfound information, she created prototypes varying in different nose-bridge heights specifically for Asian, African and Latina women.

“We also offer smart, chic

packaging where each pair comes with a reusable bag and collapsible case that reduces its carbon footprint by 60 percent,” Johnson said.

The sunglasses are sold online and in select boutiques including Fighting Eel, Lei Palm, The Kahala Hotel & Resort, Manuheelii and Sand People. Prices range from \$139 for nonpolarized lenses to \$169 for polarized lenses.



Is there a disadvantage in only offering products for women? Quite the opposite, I think it is one of our greatest

strengths. I don’t know what men would want in a business. My main concern is connecting with women, since the people buying my sunglasses are women.

What is the biggest challenge of running a small business, and how have you combatted it? Getting the word out there and marketing our product so women will fall in love with it. It’s a grind, but you find success by hustling and improving your marketing strategy.

What is your marketing strategy?

I brought in a public relations representative. We distribute an email newsletter and have developed social media and a website to reflect women wearing my glasses for a purpose – not just women lounging by the pool. Every photo shoot tells a story. We have a refer-a-friend campaign and work with local brands and influencers.

What is your strategy for growth?

It is similar to our marketing strategy. Sixty percent of our profit is from wholesale and the other 40 percent is e-commerce. I want to stay strong in both because I believe a blend is important.

What are your goals for the future?

So far we have donated 20 years of school, and by 2022 we hope to have donated 770 years of school. I’m also looking into exploring the Japanese, Canadian and Australian markets. We want to get Mohala in front of a national and global audience.

Mohala’s next event will be from 10 a.m. to noon, June 9, with Allison Izu at Ala Moana Shopping Center (Level 3, Center Court next to Neiman Marcus) and includes a short screening of the film that inspired Mohala’s mission.

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