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## FAME

PHOTOS BY CYRIL CAINE



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### The Right Stuff: Lela Boutique Sets the Trend

Who would have thought Milwaukee could be featured in the who's who of fashion resources, *the* fashion bible, *WWD* straight out of New York? The owner's of the Third Ward's savvy boutique, Lela, of course! The duo of modern meets classic always knew 'Brew City' had the style potential.

Lela, fashioned after New York's Meatpacking District and Chicago's Wicker Park all began two years ago combining both contemporary and consignment to create a blend that is always in vogue. The store is a creation of owners Carrie Arrouet and Stephanie Sherman, two women who are always a fun pair. Their approachable, cool and live-out-your dreams personality is part of the allure in shopping here. Just chat with them and you'll find, too, that the power was within them to turn around the fashion scene in the Third Ward.

In September, Carrie and Stephanie hosted one of the most talked about fashion shows in Milwaukee right in front of their store, something most only dream of. Right on Broadway street, white tents went up, the runway was lined with white chairs and the spot lights were on as 400 attendees watched Carrie and Stephanie's dream come to life.

The show was a huge success and so is their store. Stop in and you'll find amazing designers like Ania Jalosinska, Angela Frances, Avalin, Atelier by Christina Perez, Bellum, Doris Ruth, Dora Sadek, Eclectica, Fashionista, Gracie, Hedy Handbags, Ladylike Wonderwear, Lauren Edgar Duff, Janelle Schweitzer, Lili Bleu, Lilla P, Loop, maggie muse, Mel en Stel, Mica, Minimal, Nally & Millie, Relais, Shanel Regier, Supply & Demand, Sutana Clothing Company, Sara Campbell, Sara Jane, Scarlett, Scandalcat, Supply & Demand, Tammy Mars, Trina Turk, Tulle, Velvet, and Yarns.

Armed with sheer passion and adrenaline, Carrie and Stephanie single-handedly taught themselves the fashion business, quickly learning all the ropes. And the result was amazing. Their story is one of hard work, thinking outside of the box and having a lot of fun along the way.

#### How did you meet?

**Steph:** We met in a Milwaukee leadership development class. We remained friends and got together and talked about our business ideas.

**Carrie:** We realized that maybe our separate ideas really aren't so separate. And that's how we BIRTHED Lela.

**Steph:** We felt Milwaukee needed more boutique shopping, and we both loved fashion. I'm more vintage; Carrie is more modern. At first our store was more consignment than new.

**Carrie:** Our model has changed now that we've grown. We're a more 50/50 split of consignment and new



**How do you feel about the explosion of fashion coming to the Third Ward?**

**Steph:** We're very deliberate with our actions. We were one of the first fashion retailers in the fashion district. We're close with Jennifer at J-Bird. We encouraged others, too. We knew we would need others in order to make this successful. And I think what was really neat was when WWD wrote about us.

**How did WWD find you guys? That's amazing!**

**Steph:** They spoke with several of us. One of their writers freelanced for Spin magazine. And she was doing a story on one of the bands at Summer Fest, and she came here shopping. It was a nice affirmation that we are doing something right."

**You mentioned that fashion wasn't your first business**

**Steph:** Both of us worked in the non-profit sector. In sales, marketing and event planning. But for me, I've always wanted something like this since the 6th grade. And when I met Carrie, we thought, 'Well, we can do this together.' Though neither of us came from a fashion background, we both had the passion and were a quick study. And so we figured, we'll just learn.

**How did you learn?**

**C:** We walked in and asked a lot of questions.

**S:** We went to fashion week.

**C:** We really thought it was open to the public. We literally talked our way in!

**S:** Go with the flow, sweet talk and have the look.

**C:** The second time we had press passes. The first time it was laughable because we just showed up. Truly the first time was more magical, such a fluke. We just assumed we would get in. Within 15 minutes of getting there we realized, in the tent, that we would need tickets.

**Did you guys have to kick down any doors in the business?**

**S:** Well, when going to trade shows I think at first they could tell we didn't have much experience. But we both are good talkers. When you're new they look at you a little weird.

**C:** We give too much information. Those people don't care. That just alienated us. No one has personal relationships. People just come in and do their business and leave.

**S:** And then if you say you do consignment and vintage they have assumptions about you, a stereotype of what we could and couldn't purchase.

**C:** Yeah, vintage, here's a nice ugly piece over here.

**S:** And I think too, the Milwaukee part took some overcoming, too. There were definitely some assumptions that we needed to buy a certain size or look conservative-- which really hasn't been the case as far as what our customers are shopping for.

**That's good you're trying to change that.**

**S:** That's the fun part. We can say we're from Milwaukee and we don't have to act like we're embarrassed of that.

**How would you say the reception to you guys has been here in Milwaukee?**

**S:** It's been phenomenal. People are anxious for the unique experience.

**C:** Bring out the things that are new in other cities. Bring it out here and people will try it. They'll be loyal to you. People embrace it. Pay attention.

**S:** There are people here who are willing to take fashion risks. This is not the Lavern and Shirley mentality. ...Shanel is one of our top selling lines and that really says something.

**The Stephanie and Carrie duo, is that what makes this place successful? Together is that what makes the magic happen?**

**C:** In the clothing mix, I don't know. Everyday fine tuning makes the mix right. The personality is Stephanie and Carrie; it's our life.

**S:** We have some really unique vintage pieces and the contemporary come together to have a really cool look. Our personalities are reflected in what we buy. Our motto is that we only buy what we like because we want to be excited about what we sell, and we want to be excited about what our customers wear. We set aside what people have given us as advice.

**C:** Some advice given to us was connect to our customers. Any time we have strayed from buying what we like, we have been burned.

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**You guys have great taste in knowing what's hot. I love my YSL jacket! Whatever you're doing, you're doing it right.**  
 C: (laughs) Drinking a lot! No, I'm just kidding!

**What are your favorite shops to go to worldwide?**

S: When in LA last we went to Decades, a really high end consignment shop.

C: There was a whole Chanel room, just suits upon suits in plastic, in full 6 pieces. \$10,000 suits, so beautiful.

S: But that was just for looking. I love estate sales, not a traditional way to shop but a good way to find great unique things.

C: I really enjoy window shopping in NYC, there is so much to see. I get so much inspiration.

**What area?**

C: I like the village. East village, meatpacking district. Soho is cool but not as much eye candy as the village.

S: Soho is now just chains now, though.

**What makes Lela hot? What would you tell someone, why they need to come here?**

C: Cause we're here! No, no (laugh). Really, the blend.

S: It's the blend. There are options and we are one of the few stores that sells Trina Turk in the Midwest. If you want something special. We only buy 3 pieces.

C: We will almost guarantee that you will not see yourself coming and going at Lela.

S: The emerging designer thing, too, which is one-of-a-kind. Completely original.

C: Sitting next to a \$280 shirt might be a pair of \$30 pants on consignment. You don't have to be making big bucks to shop at Lela. You don't have to feel intimidated. The boutique experience is attainable for everyone. That's really important to us. Or feel like you aren't welcome if you don't spend enough money.

**That's what I love about you guys, you're so approachable!**

C: We don't want anyone to feel like, I'm not cool enough, I'm not rich enough, not fashionable enough.

S: We're learning everyday, too!

C: We're human beings. Everyone deserves to feel beautiful, however they are.

S: People appreciate that we encourage them to go outside of the box. We encourage them to be adventurous. It's fun to be risk

C: It's great to see someone come in all black or something shapeless or turtleneck and jeans, and they put on a corset and skirt. And they come out standing taller. It's not even about buying it, but having an appreciation for being able to pull off the look. You don't have to buy the stuff you try on. It's just cool to see what you can do. I actually don't care if they don't buy it. Wait, of course I care! It's more about....

S: One of our goals is to be a successful business but also to bring Milwaukee along for the ride.

C: The stigma that all we do is watch Green Bay Packers, eat brats and drink beer.

**Where are you originally from?**

C: I grew up in LaCrosse.

S: I was born here, but then we moved to Iowa, Detroit, then college in Chi, grad. School in Minneapolis, then back to Milwaukee

**A taste of all the Midwest?**

S: Yeah. I've always liked Milwaukee.

C: I was the odd duck in the family. As soon as I could, I left. I've never lived outside of Wisconsin. But I love to travel. So whenever I can, I take those ideas and bring them back here. Milwaukee's got lots of room for ideas.

S: As far as where the city is headed, the younger ones are going to change the face of the city. We are the ones who are rolling up our sleeves and doing it.

C: Not only coming up with the ideas but also making it happen.

**So are there any thoughts for other boutique locations, Brookfield or Mequon?**

S: We want to expand on what we have here. We may go to another market.

C: Lots of ideas, not sure which way we're going to go. Never say never.

S: We're already getting some customers from the northshore, and we're an urban store, so if we were to go the northshore route it would be an odd fit. Because...

C: We are so not suburban!

S: We moved to this neighborhood because of the architecture.

C: Expanding on this store is something we really want to do. We just need to find a cool million on the street.

**You two are going to get there. I can feel it!**

C: Thanks, you keep telling us that, because we really need a vacation!

**Who is the Lela Woman?**

C: 25 to 45 professional but willing to be a little funky, looking for something special. Not necessarily for a bargain but something special, and may find one along the way.

S: The Lela customer chooses green over pink, you know?

C: They're not afraid of wearing leather or lace. Or maybe together (laugh).

**Any special hopes and dreams for the future?**

C: We want to write a book. The details are top secret right now.....own some property in the third ward.

S: We admire our neighbors across the street.. These buildings have been here for hundreds of years.

C: We want to be known as the founding mothers of the fashion district.

S: I envision racks on the streets with emerging designers with studios and store fronts, the hustle and bustle.

S: Our tented fashion show, too. We have a vision of making that more than one night.

**Tell us about the Fashion show on Sept. 24:**

**C:** Planning it was exciting, and then the night of was the coolest thing ever. It was worth all the work. Awesome!

**S:** We closed off the street on both ends, rented two huge tents and put up a runway and lined it with white chairs. Shanel put up a great collection, collaborated with Moda 3, and Laddhavan, too.

**C:** We had about 400 people.

**S:** We're just a little store in the Third Ward, and when we all put our efforts together it becomes this great thing.

**C:** No one person could do it alone. We've formed some cool relationships.

**Anything else you would like us to know?**

**S:** We're happy about media covering fashion in Milwaukee.

**C:** We're excited to be a part of the fashion Renaissance; there are others who have joined it. And we can't wait to see it grow.

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- by Dana Turner

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