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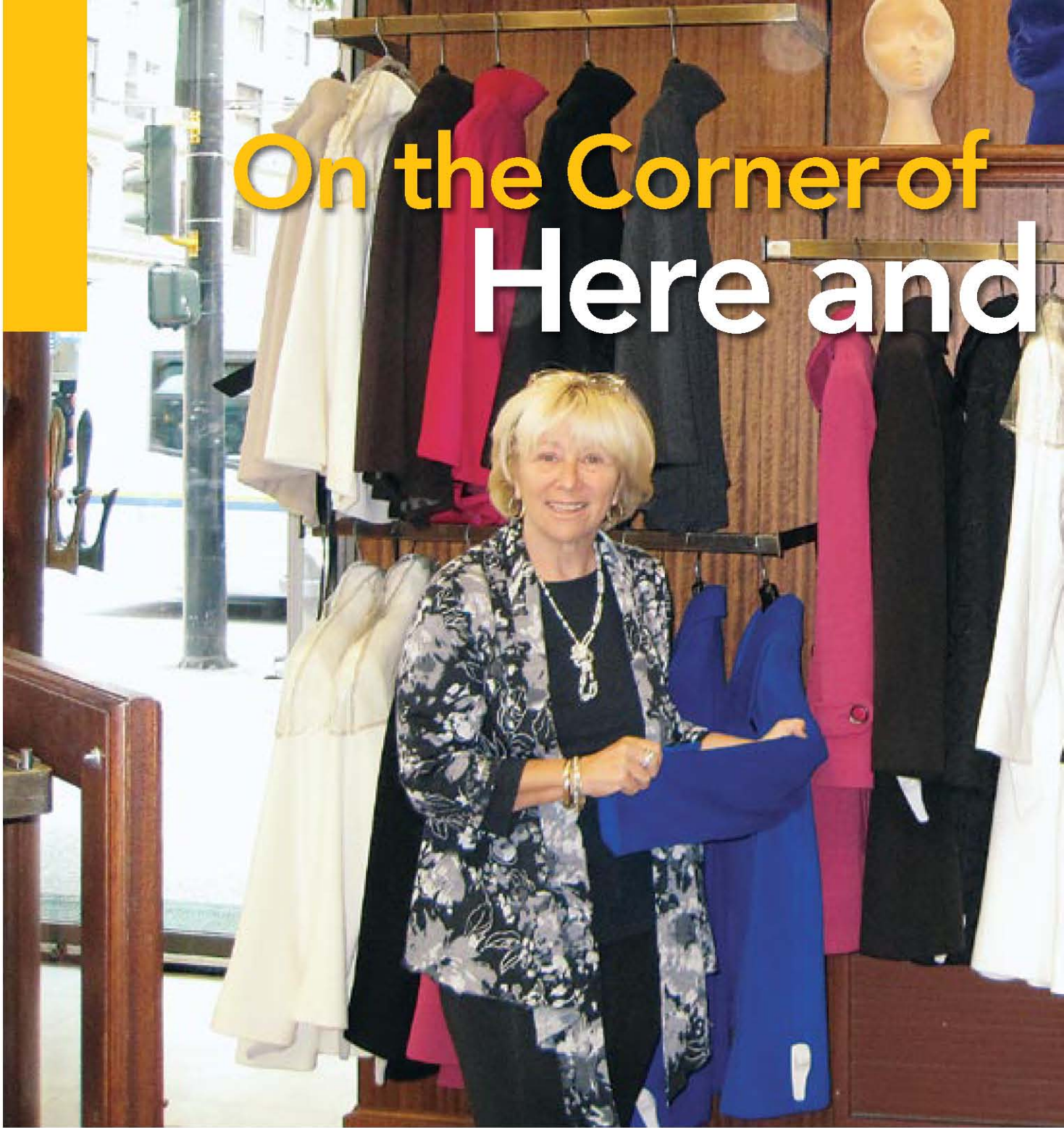
RETAIL CONNECTIONS



On the Corner of Here and Now

Through success and adversity, Snowflake's Rokie Bernstein has never strayed from being 'Canadian-focused'.

On the Corner of Here and



Melissa Kaerne

Sitting down to cappuccinos at the coffee shop adjacent to her new Snowflake retail location on the corner of Pender and Howe in Vancouver, Rokie Bernstein wastes no time in delving into her life not only as a die-hard retail entrepreneur but as a visionary, as an educator, as an economist... and for something a little different, as an ordained inter-faith Rabbi! It was all I could do but sit and marvel at this worldly person before me.

Now



Above: Customers come from around the world to purchase high end, quality furs, leathers and other products that showcase Canada's heritage.

Left: Walking into the new Snowflake location at the corner of Pender and Howe, in downtown Vancouver, you'll find Fall 2010 in full swing with classics like blacks and browns but also splashes of blues and purples.

My first basic question: How and why did you get into retail? But it turns out the question posed does not elicit an uncomplicated response from this entrepreneur.

At first, the path to retail seemed pretty linear. Rokie was born and raised in a retail family; her father's family had a clothing store in Winnipeg and he was a children's wear buyer. However,

Rokie had a dream; her biggest desire in life was to become the first Editor of Vogue Canada. Her ambition led her to a commerce degree and a world of knowledge traveling to New York to study fashion.

"Retail provides the opportunity to participate in life; it's constantly analyzing the past, while looking to the future at the same moment! You have to keep

up with fashion and while trends used to be 'what's coming up next year', it's now 'what's coming up in the next hour' finds Rokie.

Rokie then proceeds to share what she calls the "Biology of Style", a theory backed by years of vast learning and experience. She believes that biology - not designers - determine what people are going to wear. Instead, designers get into the 'flow' of how biology, society and group consciousness work to create patterns. Coming out of the 80s, Grunge became mainstream. Why? Rokie asks hypothetically - not because people decided they didn't want to cut their hair anymore but really wanted to cut holes in their jeans. No, it's because it caught the interest of a teen generation that was already depressed, miserable and needed an outlet to express themselves.

After her experiences in New York, Rokie returned to Canada and worked

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Left: Rokie attributes a great internal culture as one of the biggest reasons for Snowflake's success.

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where many retailers get their feet wet: in advertising for The Hudson's Bay Co. However, this stint was short-lived as Rokie left disillusioned by the culture of the organization. She also acquired a teaching certificate and went to work organizing and teaching business management and communications to women in Winnipeg. But with Vogue Canada still non-existent and a world of opportunity to embrace, off went Rokie and husband Bob on a whirlwind of travel and global learning.

In 1976, Rokie and family moved to Bragg Creek and a year later to Banff, because it was a time of great opportunity in the area. That same year, the Bernsteins established *The Source*, a tribal import store featuring treasures from South East Asia, India, Indonesia, Central America and Mexico, purchased directly from their designers.

While being inspired by the cultures and languages of many countries,

Rokie continued to have an unrelenting passion to showcase that Canada too, had immensely talented designers. Reinforces Rokie, "People think that the grass is always greener on the other side; they source from outside of Canada when really, Canada has some very wonderful designers right here in our own backyard that deserve to be showcased. And that's what we do, we showcase".

And so, in October of 1979, this passion came to fruition with the opening of Snowflake in Banff. Snowflake was the only store in the area that was focused on celebrating Canada through quality merchandise, not touristy souvenirs. One of Snowflake's early successes was selling Paula Lishman knitted furs.

Over 30 years later, Rokie attributes her success with Snowflake to a few key things:

Being Canadian-focused. Fur coats have gone in, out of, and back into style

across the world over the past ten years. As a result of this cycle, most Canadian manufacturers have had to close their doors. To overcome this obstacle "Snowflake was and is always Canadian-focused", says Rokie. "First, we look for Canadian sources; secondly, we then go abroad for merchandise that is designed in Canada. 'Help keep your neighbours working' is both an internal and external motto of ours".

Experimentation and creativity. And experiment they did. Over the course of 31 years, Snowflake has gone from a single location in 1979, to at its peak, six retail stores in Western Canada.

A year after their first store opened, a second location was added in the Banff Spring Hotel. Megan, Rokie's sister, came on board as the store's manager and later moved on to become CFO for the company.

The experimentation continued with sister stores Wild Rose, Snowrose, and Softwear. Wild Rose sold casual coordinates and sportswear. Snowrose was a permanent sale store, and Softwear sold outerwear and accessories. While these additions may have been short-lived, they provided some great learning experiences for Rokie and her team.

In 1987, Snowflake opened in Vancouver and two years later in Chateau Whistler. This first-generation retail operation continued to grow into the 1990s across Banff, Vancouver and Whistler.

After Rokie and Megan's mother Miriam passed away in 1997, Rokie was inspired by her mother's fabulous fashion sense and love for cashmere, to bring to life "Miriam Joy", a store focusing on classic

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cashmere fashions; "Miriam Joy" has also become Snowflake Trading's private cashmere label. A wholesale accessory line has also been added to the mix, called "Il Fait Froid", literally translated to "It's cold out".

A Great Culture. Most of Snowflake's staff have been around for years, some even decades. In fact, all of the "Head Office Hunnies", as they've been affectionately nicknamed, started on the sales floor, and all but one began working for Snowflake in Banff. Rokie attributes staff retention to an exciting work environment, good benefits and a corporate attitude that is supportive of people's personal and professional lives.

What Rokie calls being on the "Corner of Here and Now".

Definition? "Looking in all directions with a combination of emotions and intuition to guide choices that are conducive to progress – personally, professionally, locally, globally".

Translation? Being able to focus on both the past and the future, taking into account how human behaviour and trends have both a global and a local impact.

Did I mention that Rokie is an educator?

But being on the *Corner of Here and Now* for a high-end four-season outerwear retail operation comes with some controversy. Since Snowflake also sells fur and leather, Rokie and her staff have unfortunately encountered some disgruntled protesters and activists whose behaviour she describes as nothing short of harassment.

And while Rokie herself is all for freedom of speech, she continues to try to make people aware that while we live in a democratic state with freedom of speech, freedom of speech doesn't equate to the right to bully others. She suggests instead that society opens up the conversation and discusses the real issues because fur is a huge part of Canada's heritage. "It needs to be right up there with sex, religion and politics", asserts Rokie.

Rokie attributes the persecution of her business by these groups to mis-information and mis-education, not only about the use of animal products but the use of earth's natural resources. Rokie recognizes that many people feel uncomfortable about fur, yet materials, such as cotton, continue to be worn with little consideration for their past connections to social injustices, like slavery. Snowflake does not take the issue of fur lightly. Rokie and Carole, Snowflake's buyer, take great



Window design is an important part of being on the "Corner of Here and Now". Red is another prominent Fall 2010 feature colour.

efforts in knowing their suppliers and their products are not only of great quality but are ethical in their practices too. For more on this, visit www.snowflakecanada.com/about_us.

The Newest Corner of Here and Now: Pender and Howe. Due to overwhelming pressure from protesters, Hotel Vancouver's management has forced Snowflake to close their doors at that location after 17 years of operation. While extremely disappointed with the lack of support from these managers and landlords, Rokie looks to the newest corner of here and now with great enthusiasm.

The new Vancouver store, located right in the heart of the financial district and perfectly central to the cruise ship dock, Convention Centre, numerous hotels, the Skytrain and Granville Street, has great promise.

While Snowflake has an online store, physical location is still very important because Rokie feels that "experience is still number one" for Snowflake's customers. In fact, Snowflake has been involved in two Olympic Games (Calgary, Vancouver/Whistler) and has served queens, presidents and renowned athletes as customers. But it's not celebrities that make up Snowflake's base clientele (although it doesn't hurt); it's the loyal locals and the International customers that take a piece of Canada home with them to share with friends and family.

So what's in store for this visionary and her business? Personally, Rokie will continue in her quest for personal growth through teaching, providing guidance and engaging in life-long learning. And this path parallels her professional life. With three successful stores in Banff, one in Whistler and the new Vancouver addition, Rokie and her team may experiment with more expansion in Vancouver or Whistler because she believes that the Pacific is the doorway to Canada. She also hints that she has some "top secret, modern ideas! They may not work now, but maybe in the future...because it's all part of the Here and Now".

Advice to other retail entrepreneurs... While she emphasizes the importance of buying decisions, great merchandising and window display, Rokie advises other retailers to stay educated. "Keep up! See what people are wearing outside your store. Go to other cities. If you weren't not born with good taste – learn it!" ■

To learn more about Rokie and/or Snowflake, visit www.rokie.com or www.snowflakecanada.com.