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For Chicago artist Helena Kim, restoring vintage leather is a lesson in self-care — and in going viral

By Ilana Arougheti

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Helena Kim with some of her restored Coach bags on Jan. 1, 2024, in her Chicago home. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

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Most weekends at the Randolph Street Market, Helena Kim can be found with her head inside the lining of a vintage Coach purse. After finding and restoring more than 30, she knows a good piece of leather by touch.

Kim, 31, has built a following on TikTok for her [step-by-step videos](#) restoring vintage leather pieces from Coach. Bringing old, worn bags back to life takes a

careful hand. For West Loop resident Kim, who goes by her nickname Yoonie online, caring for vintage leather has helped her feel in touch with herself and her family.

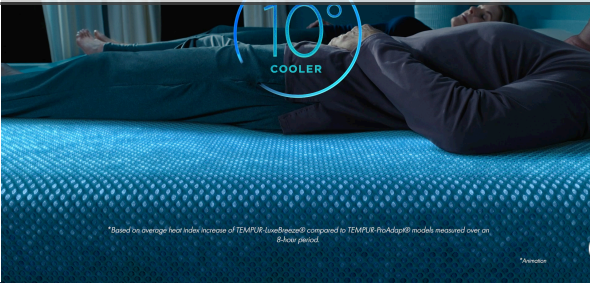
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“I started to personify these bags, and kind of like take care of them,” Kim said. “I keep getting very emotionally attached to these bags as I’m working on them.”

Kim went viral on TikTok in June 2023 with a video restoring a Coach Bleeker bag from the 1990s. Now, she has over 188,000 followers and 6 million likes on the app. Her most popular video, featuring a [Coach coin purse](#) found at Goodwill in December, has 1.6 million likes and 12.6 million views.

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Kim learned how to take care of leather by watching her parents, Korean immigrants who bought a shoe repair and tailor shop after arriving in Chicago in 1998.

Money was tight at first, Kim said, and her family life revolved around the shop. As her parents mended clothes and shoes, she made tiny purses or glued buttons onto leather panels. Whenever Kim forgot her house key, she would return to the store and help her dad clean and condition leather shoes.



Decades later, the sights, sounds and smells of the family store rush back to Kim when she sits down with a new vintage purse.

“That just really stayed with me,” Kim said. “Stacks of leather shoes behind me that needed repairing, and leather glue stuck onto the table. My mom’s in the corner hemming pants, and I’m just tinkering with little things around the shop. ... I think it’s become like a comfort place for me.”

Helena Kim works on restoring one of her Coach bags as she films for TikTok on Jan. 1, 2024, in her Chicago home. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Still, Kim didn’t rediscover leather until her late 20s. An avid fabric artist, she expected to take more after her mother, who attended fashion school and was a seamstress in Korea.

Then in 2020, Kim fell in love with a bag for the first time — a mahogany Coach Bleecker bag in sorry shape.

“I wanted to clean that bag up, and I actually knew a lot,” Kim said. “I remembered my dad gluing leather pieces back together, using clamps to make sure they stayed, washing leather and polishing it and using the horsehair brush.”

These days, Kim’s main focus is the Ergo purse, a curvy shoulder bag. The oldest bag in Kim’s collection is from 1977, and her current favorite is a red Ergo. Some come with names attached — Andrea, Casey.

Once Kim takes a bag home, she tries to identify it through a reverse image search or by flipping through old catalogs.

Then she straps on a headlamp and sets up a small tripod.

Helena Kim works on restoring one of her Coach bags as she films for TikTok on Jan. 1, 2024, in her Chicago home. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Kim cleans each bag with saddle soap and molds it back into shape, sometimes by stuffing it with paper or foam. She uses a horsehair brush to scrub out stains. This can involve dyeing parts of a darker bag with leather paint, or dunking the whole bag in a cleaning solution.

“Sometimes I find a bag that’s just in really rough condition,” Kim said. “I know it won’t sell and that makes me want to get it even more, to go home and rehab it and show it the care and respect that it deserves.”

The last step is a thorough massage with leather conditioner, sometimes paired

with various oils. Her favorite products include Leather CPR and Lexol leather conditioner.

Restoring a bag takes Kim as little as two hours. The most damaged bags can take a month to troubleshoot. If she's really stumped, Kim calls her dad, or makes a trip to the dry cleaning shop her parents now own in Northbrook.

"The last three years, I've probably called my dad more times than I had in all of my 20s," Kim said. "It's been really healing for our relationship."

Severely damaged purses can need time to rest in between treatments, Kim said. She's drawn to leather because it's strong and durable, but it genuinely responds to care.

"I think that's so fascinating that leather can heal on its own sometimes," Kim said. "Because it is skin. If you give it oils and moisturizing and the proper care, it just can come back to life."

Whether she's filming for TikTok or not, Kim prefers to work on her bags in silence. Every soothing rasp, click and brush stroke is captured on camera, overlaid with a scripted voice-over.

Helena Kim works on restoring a Coach bag on Jan. 1, 2024, in her Chicago home. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

As Kim talks through each step on camera, she quips about her daily life and the treasures left behind in some bags. Each of her TikToks takes about two hours to edit, she said.

By day, Kim is a creative director at Rit Dye, where her work includes planning

and producing videos. Editing on the job made it easier to find her rhythm with leather content, she said.

Along with the Randolph Street Market, Kim often sources bags on eBay. She also visits her local Goodwill about once a week. New Ergo bags go for \$250 to \$350 on the Coach website. Vintage bags can go for \$400.

Kim focuses on vintage Coach bags because of the quality of leather for the price point, she said. Plus, something about Coach reminds her of the 1990s mall scene buzzing around her parents' shop.

“It was just something that I have always attributed to being a cool girl,” Kim said.

She's also adept at spotting fakes, sometimes through typos on bag labels or serial numbers.

The marketing team at Coach has responded casually but positively to her TikTok account, Kim said, with occasional compliments on her videos.

[\[This TikTok influencer is eating a dish from every country \(in alphabetical order\) without leaving Chicago \]](#)

As Kim doesn't plan to resell any of her bags, overconsumption is often on her mind. She doesn't buy bags she knows she can't fix, or pieces she already owns. She won't spend more than \$30 on a thrift trip, or \$150 on an eBay auction. She also makes a point of wearing her bags in her everyday life.

Kim hopes her videos make people think twice before throwing away a damaged leather piece. Some of her followers have restored family heirlooms