

# Silicon Valley

MODERN LUXURY

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From top: Hey Lady co-founders Jessica and Emily Leung in their Mountain View studio; the sisters' inspiration board for their upcoming travel collection, with a sketch of a gladiator sandal.

# TAKE TWO

A twin-sister design team makes a fashionable comeback with a business reboot and a new lease on life.

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon // Portrait by Julia Zave

At 37 years old, twin sisters Emily and Jessica Leung have already survived their midlife crises. Three years after co-founding vintage-inspired comfort-wedding-shoe business Hey Lady in 2009, the sibling entrepreneurs pressed pause on their plans when Jessica discovered she had end-stage nasopharyngeal carcinoma, a rare type of

head and neck cancer, and was given a zero percent chance of survival. "I think everyone should have their form of a midlife crisis where they discover their meaning of life," says Emily, recalling her sister's shocking 2012 diagnosis. "We happened to discover our meaning earlier on because it was spurred by tragedy."





Fast-forward six years—after Jessica’s move to Hong Kong for treatment and her subsequent miraculous recovery—and the ebullient duo, against all odds, has optimistically forged ahead. This year marks a fresh start for the Leung sisters, who have relaunched with the debut of their Decades collection, mommy-and-me and travel capsules in the pipeline, and a newfound focus on charitable giving. “When I was going through chemo, I hit my wall,” says Jessica. “We weren’t even sure if we wanted to keep making shoes, and we had to rediscover our inspiration.” The twins now donate \$8 from every pair of shoes sold to various causes, including anti-bullying education, marine-life conservation and rare-cancer research. “We tore everything down and built it back up again,” says Emily, noting that eight is an auspicious number in Chinese culture. “Instead of just selling products, we want to inspire women and make more of an impact.”

What has remained the same is Jessica and Emily’s lighthearted sense of humor (they joke that *Forbes* erroneously dubbed them “glampreneurs,” when, in fact, they should have been called “sweatpreneurs” for their penchant for sweatpants). They’ve also remained true to their mission of creating timeless, statement-making shoes with hidden-comfort technology. Adding to the core eight best-sellers are the Decades collection’s five new styles in a range of neutral and metallic colors and heel heights. “Each style is a modern interpretation of the spirit that defines a particular decade,” says Jessica. “Gatsby is our favorite style decade.”

Having expanded beyond the wedding niche, each design is a collaboration between the sisters and a nod to notable women, from the crystal-adorned pointed-toe Principessa flat, inspired by Prince Harry’s bride-to-be Meghan Markle, to the best-selling Luck Be a Lady peep-toe platform with 5-inch heel, invoking the old-Hollywood glamour of Marilyn Monroe. “All of our inspos are strong women who know themselves and know their own voices,” says Emily. The shoes range in price from \$178 to \$368 and are crafted from 100 percent breathable silk satin or supple Italian kid leather. They also feature a full insole of NASA-developed, shock-absorbing memory foam typically used inside running and basketball shoes, a larger-than-average toe box, wing arch support, and a balanced and centered slender heel.

Like many entrepreneurs, the Leung twins’ business idea emerged from a search for a solution to a common problem that they and

their party-going girlfriends had experienced. They were baffled by the lack of comfortable designer high-heel options after attending countless weddings, galas and one particularly memorable trip to Las Vegas, when Jessica blacked out from the pain of dancing in a pair of gold Christian Louboutin 4-inch platforms. It wasn’t until the sisters, who were born in L.A.’s Northridge suburb and raised in Los Altos, went on a fortuitous run together that the premise for the business clicked. “We kept having the same ideas,” says Emily of their rare twin ESP moment, “and that’s only happened maybe three times in our lives.”

One week later, Emily quit her job in San Francisco in retail branding and Jessica left a career in fashion public relations at an L.A. denim company. With no formal design education, the UCLA graduates took an introductory fashion design course at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, spent a year on research and development, and eventually booked a one-way ticket to China, where they stumbled upon a family-run factory that was willing to produce a prototype based on their sketches. “We had zero connections, zero design experience and zero industry knowledge,” recalls Jessica of their nontraditional start. “We haven’t done anything following the rules since we began.”

Produced in a factory specializing in athletic footwear in Dongguan and sold direct-to-consumer in 36 countries via their ecommerce site (heylady.co), the collections can also be experienced at Hey Lady’s cozy 1,200-square-foot live-work design studio in Mountain View, where the twins are always excited to meet clients, host bridal-party festivities and take by-appointment fittings. Still on the horizon is the brand’s Little Lady Big Dreamers capsule collection, featuring children’s styles that complement the adult shoes and a new bohemian-inspired travel collection of packable, temperature-controlled, wear-anywhere shoes and bags made from vegan or sustainable materials.

While Jessica and Emily profess that Hey Lady’s ultimate style icon is the enduring Coco Chanel, they’re quick to note that neither of them have ever been “crazy fashion people” and they’re loathe to follow the seasonal New York fashion design calendar. “We never follow trends,” says Jessica. “We don’t really care what the Pantone color of the year is. We just do our own thing!” ■



From top: Elegant pearl bow clips, \$44-\$88, are available in several hues (and have been known to be worn as hair clips too); a century-old wooden shoe last is a reminder of the cobblery trade’s old-world craftsmanship; Fancypants, \$348, an open-toe suede and mixed-stud strappy platform heel, in Moonlight/silver.

