

GUIDE BOOK

DESIGNER
EMERGES
FROM
ASHES

By Josh Rotter

On the afternoon of Oct. 8, Bart Bridge designer Luke Fraser was at his Glen Ellen home studio with friends, designing sports-theme hats to take and sell at Walnut Creek’s Oktoberfest the following week-end. Little did he know that by midnight, the Nuns Fire, one of the devastating October 2017 Northern California wildfires, was fast approaching his four-bedroom cabin in the hills above Glen Ellen, in Sonoma County, and 34-year-old Fraser would be forced to evacuate his live-work space with little more than the clothes on his back.

The fire would take out everything else — the cabin and approximately \$70,000 dollars worth of Fraser’s sports-theme merchandise and materials, including 7,000 T-shirts, 300 pairs of overalls, countless yards of fabric, vintage apparel and thousands of sports patches.

“Everything I had designed and all my materials were up there,” he says. “There was so much to take, but I had to run out of there, so I wasn’t going to grab some T-shirts on the way out.”

Losing your entire business overnight would deter many entrepreneurs from rebuilding. Even Fraser flirted with the idea of quitting. “The fire damaged me psychologically, so the next day I was bummed, staring into space,” he says. “I said, ‘Luke, you can’t start over.’”

But then a series of fortunate events occurred that encouraged him to keep his dream alive. Someone placed a large order on the Bart Bridge website, and although Fraser couldn’t fill it, it offered validation. Then he saw a couple wearing his designs at a Burning Man decompression party. Finally, basketball season was resuming on Oct. 17, and as a season ticket holder, he needed some fresh gear to wear to Golden State Warriors games.

“I thought, ‘I need to get back into this,’ ” he says, “and there was nothing telling me not to, except my own fear. So I pared down my website while trying to quickly remake the bestsellers in time for the Christmas season. I was amazed that I got back into the swing of things for Christmas, getting even a fraction of what I was expecting.”

A longtime sports fan, the Berkeley native began designing sports-theme clothing in 2011, just to have something unique to wear at Warriors games. Inspired by the famous Telegraph Avenue vendor Patches and the area punk rock kids and hippies who sewed fabric and patches onto their jackets, he would create an alternative to the typical corporate jerseys and hats.

“Looking back, that was maybe the beginning of getting the gears churning,” he says. “There had to be another way to show my passion for sports other than an Adidas jersey.”



Photos by Peter DaSilva / Special to The Chronicle

Back in business: Luke Fraser, top, lost his Bart Bridge clothing business in the Wine Country fires in October, but has bounced back with his offbeat inventory, above.

Where to find Bart Bridge

The Brixton pop up 4-10 p.m. (including Warriors game) Feb. 3. 2140 Union St., S.F.

Chambers Bart Bridge will show a Valentine’s Day collection 1-3 p.m. Feb. 11. 601 Eddy St., S.F. Both events are fire relief fundraisers for Creative Sonoma.

Shop <https://bartbridge.com>.

So taking the extra-large T-shirts adorned with logos that were handed out at the games, Fraser cut them up and sewed them onto a pair of jeans, or he’d take some vintage fabric and a Warriors patch and sew them onto the back of a vest. He would soon branch out, creating looks inspired by the San Francisco Giants, San Francisco 49ers, Oakland A’s, Oakland Raiders, San Jose Sharks and Sacramento Kings.

“I liken my style to ikebana fashion,” he says,

referencing the art of Japanese floral arranging where a branch, a small flower and a simple vessel can make for an arresting display. “But instead of a branch, flower and vase, I have a vintage camo button-up or a pair of jeans or overall shorts, some fabric and a sports patch.”

Motivated to hone his craft, Fraser took a sewing class at a local junior college. He was soon selling his wares at Bay Area fairs and flea markets, including the Fillmore Jazz Festival, North Beach Festival and Union Street Festival, Treasure Island Flea and Oakland’s First Fridays. With his clothing well-received, he felt emboldened to create a retail site in 2015, which he named Bart Bridge, after the walkway that connects sports fans to the Oracle Arena and Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum. His clothing, which connects fans to their favorite teams, was the Oakland Magazine pick for Best Local Sports Gear Made by Local Sports Fans in 2017.

“You get compliments, and people want it, which makes you feel validated and keeps you trying to move forward,” he says. “Then I began to make enough to live.”

Today, Fraser lives with a lot less in a tight trailer in a FEMA mobile-home park in Santa Rosa, 20 minutes from his former home. He keeps new merchandise in a storage unit in nearby American Canyon. His wish for 2018, other than rebuilding his brand and regaining some of the possessions he’s lost, is finding a new home base to live and work.

“Imagine any company having all of their stuff in one room and then losing it all,” he says. “It’s hard to get back. It took me seven years to slowly get something moving, and it’s only been months since the fire. But I feel like I have more wind in my sails and something pushing me forward. I’m the designer back from the ashes. I just wish I could find a base where I’m designing and sewing and selling and not have to be so scattered.”

Josh Rotter is a San Francisco freelance writer. Email: style@sfchronicle.com.

WINDOW SHOPPING

POP-UP ELEVATES FLATS FOR S.F. WOMEN

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon

For women on the perpetual hunt for that fashion unicorn — chic yet comfortable shoes with a glove-like fit — the Margaux pop-up store on Fillmore Street may finally be the answer.

Looking to solve a sartorial problem they experienced as working professionals, New Yorkers and former Harvard College roommates Alexa Buckley and Sarah Pierson launched Margaux in 2015 as a

Shop 2053 Fillmore St., S.F. (917) 877-1201; <https://margauxny.com>.

direct-to-consumer brand of elegant, practical ballerina flats offered in bespoke and standard sizing.

“We had to do this terrible shoe shuffle all the time, which is what you do living in a city,” said 26-year-old Buckley on a recent visit to San Francisco. “You have your comfortable shoes that you wear to work before changing into your ‘pretty shoes’ under your desk. But really there should be one shoe that you can put on and feel beautiful, dressed and confident in that are also comfortable and practical for every day.”

Handcrafted from fine Italian leathers in the artisan shoe manufacturing town of Elda, Spain, Margaux shoes have expanded to include four additional silhouettes: an off-duty demi ballet flat; a pointed-toe flat; a sensible 2-inch heel; and a pointed-toe woven sling-back with detachable bow newly launched for spring.

Every style, priced between \$125 and \$295, is also offered in a range of sizes and colors and features plush foam innersole padding, a rubber-tipped leather sole and a stacked 3/8-inch heel for added support and comfort.

Buckley said the brand, headquartered in New York’s Chelsea district, already had a strong Bay



Margaux

Margaux, a direct-to-consumer brand of ballet flats and sensible heels, has extended its Fillmore pop-up.

Area customer base online, making the opening of the 600-square-foot San Francisco pop-up in mid-November a no-brainer.

“The San Francisco woman, like our New York customer, has an appreciation for timeless design and high-quality craftsmanship, but also needs products that accommodate and enable her busy lifestyle,” said Pierson in an email. “Spindly heels

just can’t stand up to San Francisco’s hills or our customers’ commutes by foot, bus or bike.”

The upper Fillmore shop, which was initially to close in January but will stay open at least through April, has a similar format to the inventory-free retail showrooms pioneered by Apple and adopted by digitally native fashion brands such as Bonobos and Warby Parker.

With its clean lines and all-white decor accented by a midnight-blue velvet loveseat, the intimate space feels like a living room where you can get a personalized fitting before placing an online order to be shipped to your doorstep.

The brand prides itself on its fit, and Buckley said it was important to provide physical stores so customers can try on pairs from the expansive range of sizes. The shoes are offered in European sizes 33 to 45 (3 to 13.5 U.S. sizing) and in narrow, medium and wide widths, whereas most department stores carry U.S. sizes 6 to 10 and are limited to medium widths, Buckley said.

The signature suede classic and limited shades of the pointe flat can also be made to measure starting at \$275. Online customers can order an at-home fitting kit for \$15, which is credited toward any order placed within 30 days. Custom shoes arrive within six weeks.

Surprisingly, most women don’t even realize they’re wearing the wrong size shoe, said Buckley. As a result, women with narrower-than-average feet size down to keep their shoes from sliding off, resulting in crunched toes, and women with wider feet compensate by sizing up, creating an annoying gap in the heel.

“A great pair of shoes and giving something to the modern woman that can take her anywhere she wants to go is empowering,” said Buckley. “You can feel comfortable, but also beautiful. That shouldn’t have to be a choice.”

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