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COURTNEY KLEIN '05:

A New Take on Maternity Fashion With Storq

Prairie dresses—long and billowy, with smocked bodices, puffy sleeves, and ruffles galore—were all the rage in summer 2022. But Courtney Klein never considered adding one to her maternity and postpartum apparel line, Storq.

Following trends is not a priority for Klein, who founded Storq in 2014 to fill a void in maternity fashion: practical, timeless, versatile styles that fit pregnant bodies comfortably without being shapeless and dowdy. Although neither she nor her business partner, Grace Kapin, had children when they began conceptualizing their exclusively online company, they heard pregnant friends lamenting about a dearth of sophisticated clothing options and sought to address this unmet need.

PHOTO: ANGELA DEGENZO

Klein, who once aspired to work for the State Department, majored in political science and dance at Haverford but ended up starting her career in brand strategy, first at a large digital advertising firm and later at a smaller boutique agency in New York. When her husband, Zach, took a job in San Francisco, she welcomed the change of scenery as well as a change in professional direction, launching Storq shortly after their move.

Since then, Klein's family and company have both grown. She and Zach now have two children, third-grader Nell and first-grader Lew; her "small but mighty team" boasts nine employees; and Storq has gained an international following.

What chief complaints inspired you to create Storq?

When my friends started getting pregnant in their 30s, they found it meant sacrificing their style and identity. Pregnant people are patronized and infantilized, and everything is suddenly about them being a vessel. The age of first-time mothers was increasing—they were established in the workforce, had more disposable income, and felt nothing in the maternity space spoke to them. They wanted the same clothing they would normally wear, just adapted to this incredible stage of life.

What were your biggest early obstacles?

Simply sticking to our guns. We linked with a factory that would do a run of our first four items—leggings, a dress, a skirt, and a tank top—and the people there said our stuff was no good, that everything was too black and we needed bright colors, that our styles were too tight when they should have been big and flowy. But we had done our research, and we were confident that many women wanted darker, more fitted, more professional-looking items. We didn't

compromise, and those first products remain among our best sellers today.

Aside from color palette and silhouette, what makes Storq different?

Our fabric must always feel amazing; a lot of our fabrics are custom. And while many mass-market players top out at an L or XL, we carry a full size range from 0 to 34 and make clothes that will look great on someone who's an XS or a 4X. We do this by fitting every item on real pregnant people, rather than using models with fake belly bumps, because your body changes everywhere when you are pregnant and postpartum. We want you to feel good all over when you wear our products—not just around your belly. We also use un-retouched images of pregnant models of varying sizes on our website and in our advertising so customers can see how things fit on a variety of body types.

What are some of your obstacles now?

A big challenge involves paid advertising on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, whose AI [artificial intelligence] algorithms frequently flag our images—particularly those of women using our nursing collection—for "excessive showing of skin" or being "sexually suggestive." A common recommendation is, "Just show the product flat on a background, off-body." Breastfeeding has nothing to do with sex, and it makes me angry that we're limited in our ability to illustrate how our products work.

Another challenge is that maternity has been the ignored stepchild of fashion for so long. Even though a huge swath of the population will experience pregnancy and parenthood, maternity-wear is dismissed as niche. One of our biggest hurdles is customers saying, "I don't want to give in to maternity clothes; I'll just wear a bigger size." It's a shame that we've been conditioned to believe we shouldn't spend money on ourselves

during pregnancy, or that pregnancy is niche.

How do you mitigate the textile waste that plagues the garment industry?

We designed our business to avoid excess inventory—it's part of being seasonless and selling the same items across time—but leftovers can be inevitable. When we have excess, or when we receive defective product, we donate it to two organizations: the Homeless Prenatal Program and Alternatives for Girls. Additionally, Storq customers can return pieces they are done with in exchange for a \$25 gift card, and we'll repackaging them for donation to those same non-profit partners. It's nice to know that instead of going to a landfill, our stuff is getting into the hands of people who really need it.

Ever wish you had studied business?

The obvious path to entrepreneurship doesn't start with poli sci and dance, but I treasure my liberal arts education, which taught me to be an intelligent thinker and problem solver across categories. Undergrad is one of few times you can enjoy closely guarded time for acquiring knowledge, and students who are like I was—students who love learning and can imagine themselves doing many different kinds of jobs—should take as many different courses as possible. The actual major isn't always the thing that matters. It's being well-read, well-written, and able to defend your ideas.

Do you keep in touch with any college classmates?

Several alumni live here in San Francisco! My closest friend from Haverford, **Shaheen Kabir '05**, lives right down the street; our kids go to the same school. We have a standing Thursday cocktail date, and it's just the best.

More information: storq.com

—Karen Brooks