

FEATURE ARTICLES

Harvard resident's yoga mats to be given to celebrities at Oscars

BY AMANDA LARIVIERE · FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2022

When Harvard resident Donna Lee had an idea to create a machine washable and dryable yoga mat in January 2020, she did not expect it would be included in luxury gift bags for celebrities two years later.

"I can't stop smiling about it," said Lee. "There's so many celebrities who are really into yoga and a healthy lifestyle, so I personally think it will be well received."

After Lee's mother died in 2014 from congestive heart failure and complications with diabetes, Lee turned to yoga and Pilates to honor her commitment to get in shape. Lee quickly became a yoga enthusiast, but she was concerned about the cleanliness of the shared rubber yoga mats provided by gyms.

Even after she purchased her own, Lee never felt she could wipe down her mat well enough.

Lee experimented with different prototypes before she created the final version of the R-Yolo (Remember You Only Live Once) mat in August 2021. Made with a top layer of Turkish cotton towel, a middle layer of foam, and a rubber bottom, the yoga mats are nonslip, hypoallergenic, and machine washable.



Donna Lee. (Courtesy photo)

Finding a needle in a haystack

Last month, Lee set out to California, hoping to find an influencer to promote her small business, R-Yolo. During her stay, she decided to reach out again to an executive of the Kimpton Hotels, a chain of boutique hotels, to whom she had tried to market her product in December. "They actually have yoga mats in the guest rooms," Lee said. "I thought maybe with the pandemic they'd be willing to look at my mat because it's machine washable like a bathrobe."



Lee's patented washable yoga mat.
(Courtesy photo).

Lee asked the executive if she could drop off a mat and was directed to La Peer, one of the boutique hotels in West Hollywood. After dropping off the mat, she was attracted to GBK Brand Bar, the hotel's high-end gift shop, and stopped in to see its artisanal lifestyle products. By chance, she met the store's owner, Gavin Keilly. Discovering him was like "finding a needle in a haystack," said Lee.

"His business is to promote new, unique products from entrepreneurs, and he said he's involved in luxury gift bags for the Oscars," Lee said. After hearing her story, Keilly invited Lee to include her mat in the gift bags. She is currently producing 70 yoga mats to be donated for the GBK Luxury Lounge event that will be held March 25 and 26. The Academy Awards ceremony will air the following day.

Production increases, opportunities come forward

Lee has had to scramble to get the mats ready for the March event. Complications with the supply chain coupled with an overwhelming demand for her product have resulted in low inventory. "This came together very quickly," said Lee. "I didn't plan any of this, and I never saw it coming."

To keep up with her existing and anticipated orders, Lee partnered with a new manufacturer in Cranston, Rhode Island. In addition to the 70 mats for the celebrities' bags, Lee is producing an extra 30 mats to give to media outlets attending the pre-Oscars show event. At the event, Lee will be assigned a photographer to take photos of her and the mat next to celebrities.

Lee is already looking ahead to future opportunities for her business. She considered pitching her product to Shark Tank, the reality television show for entrepreneurs. But with the way things have been going, she said her product could take off "organically" on its own. She currently has a utility patent pending.

"One of the top spas in the country is opening a resort and thinks this could be a nice new product for them," Lee said, without disclosing the name of the spa. She said that a couple of prominent people are interested in her product for wholesale.

In talking more about the Oscar event, Lee said, "I am so excited, nervous, and grateful I am getting this opportunity. I do have to keep myself focused and grounded, and realize these celebrities are people just like everyone else." Although, Lee does hope to meet Lady Gaga or Bradley Cooper at the event.