

LA GREEN

Fashion Goes

Small business owner spreads the spirit of Starkville throughout the Southeast

BY REAGAN POSTON

FROM AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD SELLING her handmade goods at Greenlee's Shoprite, the grocery store her family has owned for nearly 60 years, to a 24-year-old setting out with her own wholesale jewelry line, to now being the successful founder of the high-scale apparel boutique, L.A. Green, **LAUREN ANN COOPER** has always possessed an entrepreneurial spirit.

Now, the '08 College of Agriculture and Life Sciences' alumna has expanded her small business into a franchise in markets across the South. She credits her success to determination and lessons learned in the School of Human Sciences' fashion design and merchandising major, formerly the apparels, textiles, and merchandising program.

"It was challenging starting my own business, even though I was well-prepared after having worked closely with the faculty at MSU. I was so young when I started L.A. Green, and that made it difficult for me to be taken seriously," Cooper said.

Despite the uncertainties that come with entrepreneurship, once L.A. Green had a physical location, a shop on Starkville's Russell Street, the business's popularity only grew. Cooper shared—with no small amount of gratefulness—how hard it was for them to keep items on the shelf.

"We were selling things out of the back room before I'd even had a chance to put them on display," Cooper said. "That was when I knew we needed more space. We

moved to a storefront on Main Street not long after, and we've been there ever since."

Since opening shop in 2011, the business has been a proud supporter of both the T.K. Martin Center on campus and the Junior Auxiliary of Starkville, among other causes. Cooper and her management team are all active members of their local community, where Cooper serves on the Starkville Main Street Board through the Starkville Partnership. She also teaches Sunday school and volunteers regularly within her church. She shared that this hands-on involvement with the community has allowed them the ability to form more permanent bonds alongside the customer-turnover that's to be expected from a college town. For Cooper, this two-way dedication between business and customer has been the driving force behind the boutique's continued success.

"Sometimes, you hear horror stories about businesses that grow and fail just as quickly. Within our first year, I had several people offer to buy the store, but I wanted to get my roots set in Starkville before I tried to grow further. It was really important to me to build a loyal customer base, and I'm so glad that I did. My customers and my community really are a family to me. They've never let me down, and I work hard to make sure that I never let them down in return," Cooper said.

In order to provide the best retail experience possible for her customers, Cooper maintains a high standard of

service in both herself and her employees. This means everything from helping customers pick out personalized gifts for loved ones to readying a patron's dressing room ahead of their arrival with styled outfits in the correct size.

"I have a servant's heart. If I can make someone's day or make them feel good about themselves, then I've accomplished my goal," Cooper said.

With L.A. Green's inventory being geared towards trendy yet classic women, the service aspect of the boutique also includes a conscientious eye towards the apparel's quality, both in terms of fair-pay origin and well-made longevity.

When COVID-19 arrived in the U.S., Cooper had to change her purchasing decisions.

"When the pandemic started happening in America, we weren't getting our shipments as expected because a lot of our inventory might have a button or threads from China, and they were dealing with their own pandemic. Production significantly slowed, which was frustrating because our customers were still shopping, but we couldn't get our normal selections out on the floor," Cooper said.

Still, never one to give up, Cooper decided to double down with her domestic suppliers and promote the products that were American-made and had a lower chance of being delayed in production. Cooper shared that, even in light of COVID-19, customers have



continued to support L.A. Green.

“We were concerned that requesting patrons to wear masks would turn them away, but our customers have taken it all in stride. They pull on a mask, come in, say hello, and carry on with their shopping like normal,” Cooper shared.

With this unflinching dedication to the L.A. Green name, it’s no surprise that Cooper has successfully franchised the store to three additional locations: Tupelo, Nashville, and Atlanta, each owned and operated by an MSU graduate who worked directly with Cooper during their time in Starkville.

“Each of our stores remains very true to the Starkville L.A. Green standard of service, in part, I feel, because they’re run by MSU graduates. It was something of a coincidence, but it’s become a point of pride for me that the people who are upholding the boutique’s name are people who bleed maroon and white, just like me,” Cooper shared. “Bleeding maroon and white is not only

about the sports. It’s about the spirit.”

Cooper also went on to say that, while each of the boutique’s branches were holding fast to the ideals that made it L.A. Green, they have also developed something of their own personalities.

“As each location caters to its own customers, the product line-up is modified depending on the store. The owners of each franchise do a great job at engaging with their individual communities, getting a sense of what their customers are looking for, and communicating that to me so that we can order the styles we know they’ll like. For instance, the Tupelo store is downtown and tends to see a more classical line, while the Nashville and Atlanta stores get more young-professional and college-aged customers, so the stock is very trendy,” Cooper said.

In addition to the existing Starkville, Tupelo, Nashville, and Atlanta locations, Cooper hopes to one day open more franchise locations across the

Southeast and is always on the look-out for potential franchising partners.

“With our continued expansion, we’re striving to reach a large number of people while still keeping true to who we are as a small business and maintaining the high level of trust and cooperation between myself and my franchisees,” Cooper shared.

For Cooper, it’s all about maintaining the sense of community that comes with small business ownership.

“At the end of the day, I want to be able to help people, whether that’s through retail or through philanthropy or just by being a good community member,” Cooper said. “I love L.A. Green because it gives me the opportunity to do all of those things, and that’s what it takes to make a small business successful. You have to love it, even when it’s hard.” 🐾

L.A. Green can be found online at shoplagreen.com or on Instagram @shoplagreen and @la_lagreen.



Lauren Ann Cooper at L.A. Green in Starkville, MS. (photo by David Ammon)