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NORTHWEST BUSINESS

Georgetown duo launches wrapping service

By NATALIE GONTCHAROVA
Current Staff Writer

Sarah Meyer Walsh and Erin Miller have hundreds of presents to wrap this holiday season. And most are not for their friends and family.

The duo runs Haute Papier, which is known for its custom invitations, and they have just launched Haute Holiday, a custom gift-wrap service that will take orders through Dec. 20. "Then we're wrapping our own presents," Walsh said jokingly.

Like Santa's elves before Christmas, Walsh and Miller are working around the clock these days, delivering, wrapping and dropping off all the presents themselves. Working out of a Georgetown row house at 1300 35th St., they don't have a storefront, but customers can drop in to discuss their gift-wrap designs.

The customers are mostly local (from Georgetown and the surrounding areas) and usually ask to have more than 10 gifts wrapped. "It's the moms who are desperate for help and the guys who can't do it themselves," Walsh said.

Walsh and Miller launched the service because many people "take a lot of time picking out the perfect gift but spend no time making it as beautiful as it could be," Miller said.

Haute Holiday takes care of that by wrapping the gifts in one of 13 paper choices (including plain white) and accessorizing with a bow and a handmade gift tag. Holiday-style embellishments like holly, pine cones and metal snowflakes round out the designs.

And then there are the gift-wrapping trends that come and go every year, just like runway fashions. This year, red paper with white Swiss dots is all the rage, Walsh said. Classic styles and white-and-silver combinations have also gained popularity. Wrapping preferences often even reflect what colors people are wearing during a particular season, she said.

Prices range from \$3 for a gift about the size of a standard jewelry box to \$9 for a package about the size of a computer box. And for \$2 more, gifts can get the "luxe" treatment, which includes a more elaborate bow or embellishment. For bigger presents, customers should call for a price quote.

Walsh and Miller pick up packages for free in Georgetown, Foggy Bottom and Foxhall and charge \$20 for other parts of the D.C. area. Customers can mail their presents if they live outside of the area. The orders are completed between an hour and a few days from order time, depending on the number of gifts, said Walsh.

Though Haute Papier launched the custom gift-wrapping service for this holiday season, Walsh and Miller said they will continue it year-round for birthdays and other special occasions. And if they get overwhelmed? "We usually have two interns a semester," said Walsh.

The small company's bread-and-butter is still in invitations, though. Walsh launched the company in 2006 after her talent for making intricate invitations for a few selected clients "led to an unexpected demand," according to a company news release.

Like wrapping paper, invitations also follow seasonal trends. "These are the must-haves with D.C. invitations right now," said Walsh, pointing to a wedding invitation covered in orange silk. Silk is "haute," and so are invitations that come in a box.

People also like slightly unconventional materials these days, Walsh said, displaying an invitation for a wedding in St. Croix that sits in a box with Spanish moss and a real starfish.

Haute Papier is donating 5 percent of its holiday gift-wrapping sales to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.



Courtesy of Haute Papier

The owners become Santa's
elves for the holidays.

Universal Gear migrates to 14th St. corridor

The folks behind Universal Gear know how to spot a trend. When customers began migrating east, for example, they took notice. "Fourteenth Street changed," said operations manager Wei Chao. Foot traffic along 17th Street slowed, and "a lot of people moved in this direction."

Now the store has moved right along with them. On Dec. 4, after 14 years on 17th Street, Universal Gear opened its new location at 1529 14th St. The 17th Street store closed two days before, and a moving company shifted the inventory.

"They made this become like Georgetown," Chao said of 14th Street. He calls the booming boulevard "the 'it' street" and ticked off a list of nearby restaurants, bars, boutiques and galleries. "Pretty much, they have everything," he said.

Now they have Universal Gear, too. The bright and airy space, designed by Studio Architecture,

ON THE STREET

JESSICA GOULD

has an industrial atmosphere meant to remind customers of downtown New York. Concrete pillars divide racks of clothing, and raw wooden boards crisscross the ceiling. "We wanted it to ... have an edgier feeling to it," Chao said.

Like the 17th Street store, the new shop focuses on the gay community, but Universal Gear has also expanded its reach in recent years. "When it first opened, it was mainly targeted to a gay audience. Now it's 75/25," said creative director Jim Neal, referring to the proportion of gay and non-gay clientele.

Chao said the store attracts a wide swath of local men. "You can see a lot of straight people come here," he said. "We're trying to get to a conservative crowd."

In addition to generating wider appeal, the store has also tried to

meet customers' changing needs. "When our customers started asking for different things 15 years ago, most of [them] were in their 20s. Now they're in their 30s, 40s," Neal said. "You get into more tailored clothes, fitted and better-made."

To that end, Universal Gear boasts a rainbow coalition of colored shirts and sporty sneakers, as well as fur-trimmed jackets, Diesel jeans and sleek suits by top designers. The least expensive items are probably the Calvin Klein briefs, Chao said, which cost \$20 per pair. The most expensive pieces are the shiny black Dolce & Gabbana suits with \$1,245 price tags.

Universal Gear also has outposts in Chicago, New York and Atlanta. "We're still growing. We're still changing," Chao said.

The 14th Street store is open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and 11 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday.