

NORTHWEST BUSINESS

New boutique provides options for 'tweens

Gayatri Bhalla wants her new Georgetown boutique, Twixt, to be more than a clothing store. The designer — and mother of three young girls — feels there's a gap she can fill for "tween" girls, not only in terms of clothes, but also in terms of self-esteem.

"I'm really focused on providing some healthy, positive body images," Bhalla said. "It's a great age to be a girl."

Bhalla says there's pressure nowadays for girls to mature faster. And while the 'tween age group (in her store, this means roughly ages 7 through 14) may have outgrown frilly, little-girl clothes, some may not be ready for the "more mature" tube tops and short-shorts of stores like Abercrombie & Fitch and American Eagle, she said.

"We're never going to sell makeup," Bhalla said, although she does sell tiny bottles of nail polish (\$6; made with environmentally friendly materials) and soda-can-shaped, flavored lip gloss (\$3).

Other decidedly girlie items include grosgrain headbands and belts, sequined slippers and bright-colored sunglasses, which, unlike many grown-up shades, are neither oversized nor overpriced (\$9).

But Bhalla wants to involve her customers beyond accessories. Soon, she said, she would like to partner with local salons to hold "spa days" for 'tween girls, and to

ON THE STREET

NATALIE GONTCHAROVA

host events such as lectures and workshops on health and beauty.

As for the clothes, the selection, for now mainly for the under-12 set, ranges from pink sweaters with "Georgetown" logos to bathing suits to special-occasion gowns. Pink, yellow and green rule the palette — including that of the fitting room, a pastel yellow tent that resembles canopy-bed curtains.

Along with designing her own pieces, Bhalla boasts clothes from designers all over the world — "Colombia, Brazil, the United Kingdom, France, Indonesia," she said. Because Twixt is relatively tiny, she has been able to work with designers to customize clothes with the right mix of trendiness and modesty for the age group, often asking designers to lengthen a hemline here or make a top less sheer there.

Tired of generic mall stores, she has an eye for distinct pieces.

"What exists in the market ... has turned into a virtual uniform," Bhalla said.

The store's Indian-inspired cotton tunics (\$40), designed by Bhalla and hand-embroidered in Kashmir, are certainly a far cry from the Gap. They come in several colors, including hot pink. Many members of Bhalla's family live in

India and the connection helps her; the family tailor in India sews the party dresses she designs, some of which are featured in the boutique.

Bhalla also designs jewelry from semi-precious stones, many of which come from India. Chunky necklaces of turquoise, pink and yellow jewels glimmer in the display case next to the cash register.

Not all jewelry in the store is precious, though.

Bhalla's 10-year-old daughter, Maya, who attends National Cathedral School, recently offered her mother some business advice, suggesting that "girls have something to spend their pocket money on" at the boutique. So Bhalla now sells candy necklaces as well.

Although Twixt is only three weeks old, Bhalla is already busy planning arts-and-crafts events. This Saturday from noon to 5 p.m., she's holding an Easter party where girls will learn how to create and customize Faberge eggs. The event is free but attendees should make reservations by calling 202-333-3274.

Another idea in the works is a Mother's Day party at which mother-daughter pairs could personalize tank tops.

Twixt is located at 3319 Cady's Alley, among the street's many furniture and design stores. To enter the store, one passes through the outdoor café at Leopold's Kafe & Konditorei.

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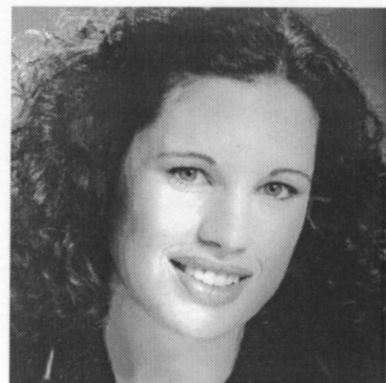
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