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FASHION ISSUE 09

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Praise Buddha

Fashion forward handbags come to life

An unassuming warehouse off of Mission Street is the last place you'd expect to find a fashion forward handbag company, but such is the case with Big Buddha. A walk through the sprawling stock room is a fashionista's dream come true. Snakeskin clutches, woven hobos and rainbows of other handbags occupy a sea of boxes waiting to be shipped to national retailers such as Dillard's, Nordstrom and Lord & Taylor. But as Jeremy Bassan, the company's 26-year-old owner will tell you, Big Buddha certainly didn't start out that way. "It's been a long road, and it started really small," Bassan says. "I pretty much learned as I went. Design wise, it was really rudimentary in the beginning."

The company technically started in 2002 when, after graduating from high school, Bassan decided to take a year off and travel the world before beginning his studies at UCSC. "Before I left, my dad suggested that I find something while I was traveling to import back so I could sell it as a part time job while I was in college," Bassan explains. "I had my eyes open and I knew I needed to find something that was lightweight, that couldn't really break and that was practical to send home." Eventually, Bassan's travels led him to see the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an, China. "There's a road that lines the entrance that's full of tourist shops," he says. "A lot of them have these little silk bags hanging and they caught my eye. I liked the material, they were lightweight, they were all one size and I

hadn't seen them anywhere else, so I thought they were probably made locally." After inquiring with one of the shopkeepers, he was pleasantly surprised to discover that the manufacturer was a family that lived only minutes away. He immediately placed an order for 300 bags, which he shipped home and sold to boutiques in Santa Barbara where he is from. The silk bags were a smashing success, and Bassan ended up placing additional orders. Eventually, Bassan learned enough about handbags that he began to assist with the designs and confidently chose a broader selection of fabrics—thus the Big Buddha of today was born.

Since its humble beginnings, Big Buddha has grown to include 26 employees and a network of more than 3,000 boutiques that sell the trendy brand nationwide. Big Buddha is even found internationally in cities across Europe and Asia. Bassan attributes the success of Big Buddha to a simple strategy. "We create fun and casual handbags that retail for \$100 or less," he says. With orders streaming in and new collections consistently on the drawing board, the strategy seems to be working out nicely. **Leslie Patrick**

For more information, visit ebigguddha.com.



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