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STOREFRONT



Hamrah's in Cresskill

By EVELYN SHIH
STAFF WRITER

Hamrah's in Cresskill is a family-owned business, but don't go in looking for Mr. Hamrah. And don't look for his sons, either.

Instead, ask for Lilli or Joyce Hamrah, the co-owners who helped their mother, Mary, start the clothing boutique in 1957. Back then, for a woman – and a widow, to boot – to start a business was nothing less than “shocking,” Lilli says.

WHAT: Women's wear boutique.

WHERE: 2 Piermont Road, Cresskill. 201-871-4444.

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

“You can't imagine how women were second-class citizens,” Joyce adds. The Hamrahs lost their original location on Union Avenue when

their first landlord decided he “wasn't comfortable selling the property to a woman in charge.” Even the mortgage that the Hamrahs needed to build their new store from scratch in 1967 was hard to get.

“We were told, ‘You're quite a big risk because you're Mrs. Hamrah and three daughters of marriageable age, not ‘Mr. Hamrah and Sons,’” Lilli says. Mary, now in her 80s, is still involved in the store, although eldest daughter Suzanne has already retired to Florida.

Luckily, the Hamrah women persevered. They grew from a 1,200-square-foot store bursting at the seams to a roomy stand-alone building on Piermont Road. From an all-purpose clothing store that tailored children's and women's clothing, the store has evolved into a high-end designer boutique carrying labels such as Lanvin, Elie Tahari



STAFF PHOTOS BY CARMINE GALASSO

Lilli and Joyce Hamrah, owners of Hamrah's women's clothing store in Cresskill, pride themselves on providing personal service to their customers.

and Vera Wang. In 2007, it was one of two stores in New Jersey to be named a “Style Leader” by Harper's Bazaar.

It takes a lot to make success look this easy. The Hamrahs do all their own buying, whether that means rubbing shoulders with the American design elite or traveling to Europe to make specific orders.

“Whatever we buy, we own,” Lilli says. “So we're careful what we buy.”

Unlike department stores that also carry designer items, Hamrah's doesn't have a locked relationship with national manufacturers. That means they can't send unsold items back to the manufacturer, but they have extra freedom to choose designs that they know will appeal to their specific customers in North Jersey.

On the high end, the store carries conversation pieces like the black Redux Charles Chang-Lima evening coat for \$1,800 and the Lanvin tent dress for \$1,795.

But it also has a great sales section. On a recent visit, a \$399 Nanette Lepore black tailored jacket with blue stripes was a bargain at \$59.99. Items from Donna Karan, Lanvin and Max Mara were also marked down.

Hamrah's also carries midrange items, including a gold knit dress from Elie Tahari for \$348, a Lorena Gandolfini woven mohair bag for \$399, the Etro line of casual cruise wear, accessories such as \$110 jet earrings and a resin necklace for \$145.

But the real reason to go to Hamrah's, the owners say, is for the personalized service. “We grew up giving service and doing merchandising,” Lilli says. “When we have events, our customers always come to tell us stories about merchandise that they've bought from us over the years. ... The fact that they remember – that's the biggest compliment.”

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