

Clothes Force

*Eco-conscious Maxine Bédât and Soraya Darabi
find fast success with slow fashion.*

Written by Julie Jacobs | Photography courtesy of Zady

Amid the flurry of foot traffic inside New York's LaGuardia Airport this past holiday season, a new pop-up shop encompassing all of 300 square feet stopped many travelers in their tracks. The goods sold there ranged from clothing to clutches to candles. But what really attracted consumers beyond the variety and quality was learning about and contributing to the slow-fashion movement—one that aims to put an end to questionable manufacturing practices and the production of poorly crafted garments that wind up in landfills after just a handful of washes.

The company behind the shop—and staying ahead of the curve when it comes to eco-conscious style trends—is Zady, co-founded

As Bédât and Darabi wrote in a *MariaShriver.com* posting this past March, “Our mission is to inspire people to rethink fast fashion (apparel produced inexpensively to keep up with fast-changing runway trends at low cost) entirely. This throwaway type of manufacturing is harmful for the environment, for workers who are paid in pennies overseas to produce these garments, and for the American economy, which has lost the vast majority of its manufacturing industry to lower-cost marketplaces.”

Zady currently carries more than 40 labels, including *Armor Lux*, *Falconwright*, *imogene + willie*, *Steven Alan*, *Sundry*, and *Won Hundred*. Its inventory also benefits from a partnership

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in August 2013 by Maxine Bédât, 31, and Soraya Darabi, 30. Zady (meaning “grandfather” in Yiddish and “prosperous” in Arabic) is steadfast in providing its customers with solidly constructed and timelessly fashionable apparel, jewelry, and home goods. It looks to revive traditional design techniques mastered by artisans throughout the world and give a hand up to aspiring micro-business owners, all while remaining mindful of the environmental origins and ramifications of its merchandise and catering to consumers who share its stance.

with *The Bootstrap Project*, a nonprofit co-founded in 2010 by Bédât that supports craftsmanship from places like Nepal and Zambia. Among Zady's numerous offerings that strike a chord in environmental friendliness are an Italian-made notebook that uses stone for paper instead of trees, and stylish winter jackets from *ECOALF* that are created from recycled plastic bottles.

Finding brands in step with Zady's mission is research-intensive, often involving factory visits and in-depth interviews with owners. “The buying process is really, really difficult,”



Soraya Darabi



Maxine Bédât

says Darabi as she sits in Zady's Chelsea office with Bédât by her side. "It's not difficult coming up with the criteria we want in these brands. We have a whole list of them. It's hard to find brands that actually live up to that criteria."

The challenge is one they've struggled with since Zady's inception, when they began attending trade shows, which they call their "library and research centers." At a show at the Jacob Javits Center in Manhattan, Bédât remembers combing through aisle upon aisle of clothing and asking vendor after vendor where their items came from.

"The blank stares...and the answers that we received were scary, ranging from 'I don't know' to [using]...politically incorrect terms. It was just a clear reflection that the world we were stepping into was really outdated," Bédât remembers. "But every maybe 1 in 100 brands that we'd ask this question to, they'd sort of light up and would dive into the great detail and history and heritage of the products that they were carrying, and we knew at that moment that those would be the brands that we would partner with. They're very close to all of their suppliers, they're working with their factories, and they know exactly what's happening throughout their supply chain."

With a year of business operations now under their belts, Darabi and Bédât have a well-oiled process in place for vetting brands and mining "the nitty-gritty of how a product comes together and why it's going to be long-lasting." As part of this plan, they require label owners to sign a contract with Zady listing any raw materials they use and how and from where they're sourced, as well as their headquarter and manufacturing locations. The information is posted on Zady's website along with a

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series of badges indicating whether items are handmade, locally sourced, and/or sustainable.

The attention to such details, coupled with the stories behind the products and their makers, arguably sets Zady apart from other like-minded companies; it is a marriage of strong e-commerce and subtle eco-education that is nurturing both sales and community.

"What we're trying to show, to demonstrate to our customers, is the different ways in which a company can be sustainable," notes Bédât, adding that their customers are now pointing them to suitable products.

“What we did not want to become was two people standing up on a soapbox and nobody listening. And it happens very quickly when you’re explaining unfair truths of the world,” she continues. “But what you can do is engage people with storytelling, and that’s what we’re doing. We try to reveal information, but at the same time show what’s possible.”

The story of how Darabi and Bédât joined forces begins in Minnesota, where the two were high-school chums. Though they lost contact for a decade following graduation, they kept tabs on each other’s careers via social media: Darabi worked in digital media for the *New York Times* and co-founded Foodspotting, an app that Open Table purchased last year for \$10 million; Bédât served as a law clerk for the United Nations before conceiving The Bootstrap Project, which reunited the old friends when Darabi came on board as an adviser. The idea to establish Zady materialized after they themselves had succumbed to the pull of fast fashion, but then started learning about the dark side of such consumerism.

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“We had these closets full of clothing but never anything to wear, and that kind of constant feeling of having to follow trends and having clothing that was really of such low quality that it wouldn’t last more than two washes in the washing machine... when we had that shared experience...and once we learned how beautiful [other] products were made, it made it just that much more shocking when we found out how the rest of our clothing in our wardrobe was made,” Bédât offers. “That was really kind of the impetus to say, ‘Hold on, there’s a major issue happening here with our apparel supply chain, what can we do as millennials to fix that problem?’”

They both quickly became passionate about supporting the slow-fashion revolution through a new company, and swapped articles over the course of a year about the negative impact fast-fashion supply chains have on human rights, the economy, and the environment. “Our environment is being destroyed by producing too many garments that aren’t made to last, and they fall apart and they end up in landfills,” Darabi points out. “When Maxine and I came together to start a business, it was, ‘How do we create a brand that’s really authentic, true to its word, and believes in honesty, quality, and process?’”

Their answer was Zady, which today runs on a little engine—just five permanent staffers in addition to Bédât and Darabi, plus a small army of interns and volunteers, all of whom are committed to the brand and the movement. There have been all-nighters, e-mailing in the wee hours, and the rolling up of many sleeves. The co-founders split most of the business’s responsibilities, but write leadership pieces and do interviews jointly. They are well matched, each having a background in successfully developing and growing a venture.

“Maxine and I work very well together, in part because we do have a strong foundation,” says Darabi, stressing that choosing the right partner is vital. “But it’s not easy. You need to pick someone with whom you have a similar vision for the company, but with whom you can also discuss things and have different

points of view and still come to an amicable and strong conclusion that’s best for the company. And somebody who you trust will be there alongside you with the good and bad.”

Fortunately, there has been a lot of good for Zady to date. LaGuardia has asked the company back and other airports have sent similar invitations. While it’s still a bit early for such conversations, going the brick-and-mortar route is very much a part of the duo’s business plan. Darabi reveals that Zady wants to be an omnichannel brand, offering customers many different ways to stay in touch—whether through its website or mobile app, not to mention social media, where customer feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. On Twitter, for example, followers have tweeted what Darabi describes as “really, really kind responses... supporting the movement and supporting the brand, saying that they were waiting for a stylish, sustainable brand to come into their lives at the right price point. We’re very happy that Zady is meeting that need.”

Also on the upside is the environmental awareness Zady has spurred. “What is most exciting at this point is that customers and the community are opening their eyes to the issue, and that you know is the spark of something massive,” remarks Bédât. “We’re so thrilled with how things have gone. It’s been an exciting, fast-moving train, and we are just keeping up. We have big visions for Zady. We see ourselves as a future dominant player.” **LM**