

Absolutely Riveting

BREAKING NORMS WITH A BUSINESS INSPIRED BY STRENGTH

WORDS BY KAITIE BRIHN

“Back in the garage feels like so long ago,” Cameron Cruse, co-founder of R.Riveter, says with nostalgia in her voice. “The garage was bare bones, totally utilitarian, all function. Nothing fancy at all. One thing Lisa and I have both mastered is making something out of nothing.”

With R.Riveter, a handmade handbag company with a good cause, ranking in the top 300 for nationwide growth in 2017, as well as appearing on Shark Tank in 2016, no one doubts that Cameron Cruse and Lisa Bradley can make something out of nothing. Or, at least, make a successful and meaningful multimillion-dollar business out of a garage studio in the North Georgia Mountains and an old industrial sewing machine named “Rosie.”

Cameron and Lisa broke a lot of norms when creating R.Riveter back in 2011. The first one: “We started R.Riveter with a ‘why’—a solution to a problem we were facing. Our goal was to create opportunities for military spouses to have mobile and flexible income, by bringing manufacturing into their homes,” Lisa explains. With military families moving an average of every 2.9 years, it’s difficult for military spouses to find and keep a job. As a result, 57 percent do not work outside of the house. Lisa and Cameron, military wives, who despite being well-educated, found themselves in this very position, decided to take on the cause. “It’s funny to think that we had the business model idea before we decided what we even wanted to make.”

R.Riveter certainly accomplished its goal. The enterprise currently employs 75 military spouses, and 33 percent of every dollar made goes back into the hands of a military spouse.

Which brings us to the product that Cameron and Lisa decided to make: handbags. “When deciding on a product to make, we wanted the item to be something personal that could stand up to the story and impact of the unique way it is manufactured. A woman chooses a specific brand of handbag because she wants to represent what she portrays herself as—whether that is through the brand, the style or (in our case) the mission behind the product.” Lisa says, “We loved that unlike clothing you switch out frequently, women carry a handbag every day, and our customers know when they pick up an R.Riveter handbag, they are picking up a whole community of women.”

The bags are made out of canvas and leather materials and offer customers a unique style with utilitarian purpose that works for a multitude of occasions.

The bags have another special component to them. They are assembled all across the country in the houses of the Riveters—military spouses who can work from home and make their own hours. Each Riveter special-

izes in crafting one or two components of the bag. When they’ve completed their parts, they send them to be assembled in North Carolina. When customers buy an R.Riveter product, they’ll notice an RR number stamped onto each component of the bag. This number is unique to the specific maker of that piece.

Cameron and Lisa were breaking another norm with this assembly process. “Many people ask us why we seemingly made things more complicated by moving parts of our manufacturing into different homes across the country,” Cameron says. But the founders had their reasons: they wanted military spouses to be able to take their job with them no matter where the military life moved them. “You can do the remote Riveter job with a home sewing machine and basic tools.”

Straying from the norms helped the founders succeed. Not only did it work for their goals and for their business needs, it also caught the attention of the “sharks” on *Shark Tank*. Their assembly model impressed the toughened entrepreneurs and led to numerous bids, including the one they accepted from investor Mark Cuban. Though uncommon, their process works because of the people in it. “It’s a large value stream of individuals, working together toward one common goal,” Lisa explains.

R.Riveter got its name from the World War II icon, Rosie the Riveter. “Rosie was an embodiment of everything we felt was important to us, and what we stand for as a company: women’s right to work, female empowerment, and just standing up for what you believe in and what you need to do—no matter how difficult or complicated the path may be,” Cameron says.

“Our business model is inspired by the strength [of the original Rosies], and it is bringing manufacturing back into the home so modern-day women really can do it all,” Lisa adds.

What’s new for R.Riveter? Recently, the fall line came out with some exciting changes, introducing new colors and styles. “The whole theme behind the collection is the idea that you can write your own story or your own rules or your own ending. So much of what we did when we started this company was to decide that our destination and our fate as military spouses wouldn’t be controlled by our situation. So we took that inspiration and decided to put notes of that idea into the line: new leather, good colors, and some new variations of our classic bag. We’ve also got some brand-new styles coming up in November and December as well,” Cameron reveals. □





If you’re interested in supporting R.Riveter and adding some extra meaning to your next stylish purchase, head over to rriveter.com