

## Quite a 'Story' of reinvention

*From Barbie doll couture to the top of the fashion world*

BY SANDE SNEAD ('82)

If you are doing business the same way you were last year, you will not still be in business this year." Such simple, but sage advice comes from small business owner **Heidi Story ('91)**, who took a page out of Madonna's playbook and reinvented herself in the last year.

With high-dollar rents in the trendy Carytown shopping district in Richmond and a recession bearing down, Story revamped the business plan for her namesake store. First, she scaled back the size of her designer boutique, moving from a 2,800-square-foot space to a 1,000-square-foot space. Next, she let all of her employees go except one intern. Then, she branched out from the two components of her store – retail and sewing classes – and added custom design work and alterations. The result: A business model that is working and flourishing in tough economic times.

"I am so glad I got a business degree at JMU," says the business and marketing major, who graduated with honors and paid her own way through college. "I would probably not still be in business today if I did not have that background."

Story (and yes, Heidi Story is her given name) is an "artiste" at heart.

She began sewing when she was 10 or 11 with her mother and grandmother's guidance. As a "Molly Ringwaldesque dorky kind of girl," she was the most popular babysitter in town, making Barbie doll clothes for the children in her charge.

After college, Story faced her first recession and couldn't find work. She used the down time to get her portfolio together and got herself into the prestigious Parsons School of Design.

"I didn't know a soul in New York, so I slept on the floor of a completely empty apartment of a friend of a friend's," Story says. "I didn't have one stick of furniture. It was so New York and everything you think of when you think of a starving artist in New York."

And yet, she stayed – for 11 years.

"All kinds of crazy things happen in New York," Story remembers. "I volunteered once at the Council of Fashion Designer Awards, and my job was to greet all the famous people. I met Sigourney Weaver, Fran Drescher, Hugh Grant, John Stamos, Matt

LeBlanc and numerous models. Well, PETA members snuck in, and they were throwing red paint on all these celebrities' fur coats. Everyone was screaming and down on the floor thinking there was a bomb threat or something. That was my glamorous night in New York, and then I had to go back to my ghetto apartment."

While living in New York, Story designed a line of bridesmaid dresses which outfitted a number of her JMU friends' weddings, including **Kathrine Lawrence Calderazzi ('92)**.

"I was looking for something simple and classic for my bridesmaids, which when I got married in 1997, didn't exist," Calderazzi says. "But Heidi had a variety of styles for me to choose from, and I ended up with a floor-length sleeveless sheath with empire waists in midnight blue. She had everyone take many, many measurements, but they were just what I was looking for. They were amazing, and they fit everybody so well."

But the glamour of New York began to wear thin.

"I had my own little 350-square-foot space out of my apartment in Brooklyn and was doing design and production of a line of bridal gowns, but yet I was still poor," Story says. "And being poor in New York is not like being poor anywhere else. I was so poor I couldn't even afford the 'or.' I was po'."

So she "sold out."

Story became a pharmaceutical rep for Merck & Co. and started making and saving money for the first time in her life. But after six years in sales, her aunt died of ovarian cancer and it served as a wake-up call.

"I thought, 'I need to get back to what I love.'"

And four and a half years later, Story is still doing what she loves. Her spring sewing classes are sold out. She has a custom-made charmeuse and silk chiffon dress in the works for an opera singer, and she has a basket of alteration work waiting. Her loyal retail customers know she carries hard-to-find designers – like Ella Moss, Susana Monaco and ellembec. Story is adamant about getting the right fit for her clients, so she alters the clothes she sells for free. Oh, and she's writing a sewing book for kids. Quite a Story. **✎**

\* Learn more at [www.heidistory.com/](http://www.heidistory.com/)



**Heidi Story ('91) sells designer fashions and teaches sewing techniques in her boutique in the trendy Carytown shopping district in Richmond.**