

HOMEWARD BOUND, WEST HARTFORD, CONN.

harmonic

PROGRESSION



Homeward Bound's motto, Interior Harmony, refers to the stores' mission to help customers find harmony in their interior spaces with home furnishings, and within themselves through fashion and personal care products. Much of the merchandise comes from organic, sustainable, socially responsible sources or other cultures. Walsh said that while it's easy to find products that fit these categories, she likes a very high style and won't buy any product unless it is also exceptional.

THREE MONTHS AGO, Kathy Walsh and her husband of three years, Trip Rothschild, signed a lease for their third Homeward Bound store, in West Hartford, Conn. A month later the store opened, just in time for the residents of Greater Hartford and central Connecticut to begin their holiday shopping with Homeward Bound's organic "Interior Harmony" lifestyle selections.

The store's name, Homeward Bound, comes from Simon & Garfunkel's 1966 song of the same name. "We occasionally run an ad headlined, 'Home, where my sofa lies waiting silently for me,'" Rothschild said. "Interior Harmony, the store's motto, means that we endeavor to help customers find harmony within themselves via fashion."

STORY BY SUSAN DICKENSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOUISE JOHNSON



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The harmonic inspiration, however, begins with Walsh and the synergy she feels with her vendors. “The most enjoyable part of my job is my connection to the products — I don’t buy unless I love the people behind it, their philosophy, the materials and the workmanship,” she said.

Homeward Bound’s new location, in West Hartford’s Blue Back Square, follows on the success of stores opened in 2005 in Great Barrington, Mass., and 2006 in New Milford, Conn. The fact that sales at the Homeward Bound stores have grown more than 30% per year speaks not only to Walsh’s and Rothschild’s business acumen, but also to the marketability of a sophisticated merchandise mix, much of which comes from organic, sustainable, socially responsible or international sources.

“Green is where my heart is ... and beautiful, high-end products that make my customers happy and help make the world a better place,” Walsh said. Her collections of furniture, home accents, personal accessories, apparel, jewelry and gifts are carefully edited for quality, style and source, in a variety of price points. The challenge is finding products that look good. “There

At Homeward Bound in West Hartford, Ct., a paper cut-out tree of life adorns a Venetian plaster wall beneath an antique chandelier. Owners Kathy Walsh and Trip Rothschild were told by several people that their expansion into three locations in three years was “nuts,” but Rothschild and Walsh believe in their market niche.



The exterior of the completed West Hartford Blue Back Square store, at night. The front Picasso-inspired panels and Klimt-inspired window art are original artwork done exclusively for Homeward Bound. Each of the three stores is slightly different, with merchandise tweaked to fit the local customer base, but Walsh has worked hard to make sure all three stores have the same feel. Kathy Walsh, left, developed her early merchandising skills as a buyer for Bloomingdale’s, Henri Bendel’s and Barneys. In later years she moved into interiors and furnishings as a senior buyer at New York’s ABC Carpet & Home. These days she’s put it all together in a well-defined lifestyle presentation that not only sells well, but invites inquiries from the local media who turn to her for advice on eco-friendly trends in furnishings and apparel.



The work of local artists is showcased on an Art Wall in each store. “We publicize it, sell it for them, but don’t take any money — the artists decide in advance what percentage they want to donate to a local arts program,” Walsh said.

All three stores carry the same styles and merchandise but with a slightly different vibe. “I wanted the same good feeling in all the stores, but not identical stores.”

are plenty of products out there that fit the sustainable and organic categories, but I like a very high style and won’t buy it unless the product is also exceptional.”

And if anyone else is offering the same thing locally, Walsh has yet to find them. “Our customers walk in and say, ‘wow’ — they’re happy to see that it’s all here and that they don’t have to schlep all over the place to find a couch, accessories, a dress or jewelry they can wear. It’s like they think they’ve found a secret, a little gem.”

All three stores carry the same styles and merchandise but with a slightly different vibe. “I wanted the same good feeling in all the stores, but not identical stores,” Walsh said. Best sellers include natural beeswax candles, synthetic vegan leather bags, hypoallergenic toys, and upholstered furniture made with natural and vegetable-dyed fabrics, soy-based filler and sustainable wood frames.

Store brand exclusives include a bedding line of hand-blocked, natural, high-thread-count cotton, and custom-made live-edge wood furniture made by a local craftsman. Other cultures and nonprofit groups are supported through the sale of products such as Kenya Critters, Peruvian handknitted toys by Bla Bla, and MonkeyBiz beaded animals.

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Gifts are wrapped in burlap with colored twine, and reusable shopping bags are made of hand-blocked recycled fabric. To keep the inventory turning, a 10% discount on floor merchandise is offered at all times.

Walsh developed her merchandising talent following her graduation from New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology when she worked as a buyer for Bloomingdale’s, Henri Bendel and Barneys. In later years she applied her skills to interiors and furnishings at New York’s eclectic empo-



Walsh, who used to be a senior buyer at ABC Carpet & Home, looks for quality, high style and responsible sourcing when selecting her collections of furniture, home accents, personal accessories, apparel, jewelry and gifts.



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A 20-foot painted archway from India separates Homeward Bound's clothing boutique from the rest of the store. The store provides hand-blocked shopping bags made from recycled fabric and gift wraps in burlap and colored twine.

Homeward Bound's furniture includes organic high-end lines such as Verellen and Cisco Brothers InsideGreen that provide a backdrop for the eclectic collection of merchandise Walsh finds on domestic and international buying trips.



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While Walsh stays busy buying, merchandising, advertising and marketing the business, Rothschild manages the operations, human resources, business development and finances. His retail connections were inherited from his great-great-grandfather, the "Abraham" half of Abraham & Straus, a major Brooklyn-based department store that eventually became a link in the Federated-Macy's chain.

Rothschild's business background includes undergrad studies at Harvard and NYU, and an MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Most recently he owned the Housatonic Valley Publishing Co., a publisher of 10 community weekly newspapers in the New Milford area.

New Milford is also where the couple resides, in a renovated 1810 home they share with five daughters, and where they chose to build their second store. Rothschild credits an associate for

bringing West Hartford's Blue Back Square, a new mixed-use development, to their attention as a site for their third location.

"The (Blue Back Square) project was conceived by the town government and the developers were strongly encouraged to seek out local and regional retailers, not just national tenants, so as to differentiate Blue Back from the stores located in or near the large mall that is partially located in West Hartford," Rothschild said. "For that reason Homeward Bound and several other distinctive, upscale retailers were heavily courted by the developers. From our point of view, co-locating with these tenants as well as the big national players was pretty irresistible."

Asked if he had any advice for independent retailers looking to expand to other locations, Rothschild doesn't abide by any hard rules but said many people, including bankers, told the couple that their expansion into three locations in three years was nuts. "You have to think strategically," he said. "If you believe as we do that we have a business concept and a market niche that is expandable and defensible, you've got to take advantage of the opportunities that come your way before someone else does." ■