



Sense, Sensibility—And Style

Homeward Bound Builds an Empire of Good Taste

How long will it be before a Homeward Bound store can be found in every upscale shopping area along the East Coast?

The owners of the burgeoning lifestyle store chain, Trip Rothschild and Kathy Walsh, aren't saying for sure but if their actions speak for them it won't be long.

The entrepreneurial New Milford, Conn., couple recently opened their third store in as many years. The first location, a large, airy space in Great Barrington, Mass., filled with their signature blend of eclectic, worldly, organic and modern home goods, clothing and gifts was a huge hit in 2006. A larger location in New Milford, Conn., in a period building on Bank Street, has become a staple for Litchfield County residents. And their newest location, in West Hartford's Blue Back Square shopping destination, is poised to be the entrepreneurial couple's biggest hit yet.

Though friends and associates have doubted the couple's fast-moving business plan, they are sticking to their guns. "That's a perfectly legitimate ►

Text by LAUREL TUOHY Photos by WALTER KIDD



Top, Kathy Walsh at the new Homeward Bound store in West Hartford, Conn. Above, colorful candles. Facing page, an overview of the new store.



point of view—but it's not ours—and it's not the point of view of a lot of people who are truly entrepreneurial," said Mr. Rothschild of those who advised them to move more slowly.

It's probably the couple's working dynamic that makes them such suitable business, and life, partners. Mr. Rothschild is a confident businessman who is not afraid to take a risk on a good idea. "If you are going to make a commitment, make it in a way that's going to be worthwhile," he said. He also finds inspiration in his innovative wife. Ms. Walsh seems to breathe fashion and beauty, and her way of mixing and matching different pieces and spotting the trends before anyone else is what is making the chain successful. Her impressive résumé, sprinkled with buying titles at some exclusive retailers—ABC Carpet & Home and the retail trinity of Barneys, Bloomingdale's and Henri Bendel—has only sharpened her vision.

In each of the three stores the couple aimed to create a slightly different vibe while still maintaining a coherent vision. Each new outlet is inspired by what's happened in Ms. Walsh's life—her interests, travels and passions. A trip to India the couple took last year provided the starting point for much of the West Hartford store's backdrop.

The cranberry walls along the back of the space give the store a warm depth and set off a rough-hewn wooden archway from India that guests walk through to enter a striking living room tableaux. Live-edge wooden shelving playfully challenges industrial concrete floors and a minimalist steel cash wrap counter, while an antique-y pressed tin ceiling presides over the mix-and-match look.

Like the other Homeward Bound stores, the Blue Back Square location is stocked with their staple lines: Juliska flatware, Cisco furniture, Red Flower body products and women's clothing by Elm, Chan Luu and Ogle, as well as one-of-a-kind items not available anywhere else.

The fruits of their Indian adventure—oversized mirrors, trunks, objects d'art, occasional and console tables—made their way back from Rajasthan in a 40-foot crate only to sell out in all three locations before the couple ordered more of the Asian items.

The clients of Homeward Bound seem to be searching for an eclectic, worldly look that runs counter to the homogenous scenes set forth in Pottery

Barn or Ikea catalogues. The playful looks created by the store's interior designers may take a streamlined, modern, organic sofa and place it next to an antique table. Mixing different styles and elements while maintaining a well composed look is something they strive for.

Before opening the latest store, Ms. Walsh made another trip to find inspiration, this time to Paris to study storefronts. She planned to eschew the traditional retail look of full-frontal plate glass windows in favor of a more elegant design for the chain's first urban store. What she came up with was inspired by the raised fronts of the Lef Bank galleries. The store's windows don't reach the floor, as in many chain boutiques, but start at about hip height, inspiring passerby to look up at the scenes inside.

New Milford artist Veronica Swain provides all the chain's original artwork, from the life-sized tree frescoes in each store to the charming lifestyle sketches that appear in advertisements. In the West Hartford location, changeable art panels line the door and will be shifted seasonally to reflect the always-changing look inside the store.

The business has been compared to lifestyle superstore Anthropologie, which the owners take in stride, but the similarities (which basically start and end at an eclectic, worldly look) are unintentional.

"I take that as a compliment because they are amazing retailers," said Ms. Walsh. She prefers the spin a recent customer gave when she stage-whispered to her friend within earshot of the owner, "It's like Anthropologie in here—only much better." Though that store stocks a lot of clothing and just a bit of furniture, the emphasis is on home goods at Homeward Bound, while women's clothing makes up only about 30 percent of the stock.

Unlike Anthropologie, however, Ms. Walsh doesn't see Homeward Bound evolving into a mall fixture. "I feel dead in malls, this dead energy. I love being outdoors and in more of a downtown or streetscape," she added, citing downtown Westport, Conn., as a good example of what she meant. "It's fun to have a lot of people walk through the door who really get it, where we wouldn't have to work really hard to sell something really chic," she said.

The reason they moved so fast in opening their third store was that they wanted to get into the prestigious



Top, an inside-out view at the new Homeward Bound store in West Hartford, Conn. Middle, jewelry, and above, the exterior.

Blue Back Square development. “You have to be open to opportunity,” said Mr. Rothschild of the Nov. 3 debut in a municipality that borders Connecticut’s capital and is a shopping and lifestyle center.

The reason they wanted to secure a space in the development is the amazing concept behind the new destination and the national attention the complex has already received. “We love the concept of Blue Back Square. It’s an example of the new urbanist kind of development that is, rather than a shopping mall, a mixed-use development that includes condos and office space. We love how it’s integrated with existing West Hartford downtown, it ties right into Main Street,” mused Mr. Rothschild.

Though the development doesn’t officially open until March 1, a softer opening happened in November for the stores that took their places early. In addition to Homeward Bound there are a two-floor Crate and Barrel, a supersized Barnes and Noble with a café, The Cheesecake Factory, Criterion Cinemas, National Jean Company, REI, Origins, Au Bon Pain, Janie and Jack, Ann Taylor, White House Black Market, JD’s Cosmetic Essentials, Lucy Activewear, Munson Chocolates and a Whole Foods Market. Above the retail spaces are luxury condos that begin in the half-million-dollar range, a New York Sports Club and office space that can accommodate doctors, lawyers and all manner of professionals.

Blue Back Square is designed for foot traffic and is connected to the traditional downtown by comely footpaths and side streets. By March, it will host a range of restaurants and nightlife destinations as well, so there will be plenty of people coming to the area for a variety of reasons. One of the new store’s employees called the cutting-edge development “a place where you can live, eat, work, shop and play.”

For the owners’ next venture, which is not yet planned, they are considering an out-of-state location, though they are enamored of the hip downtowns of Fairfield and South Norwalk in Connecticut as well. They also mentioned the Boston area, Providence, R.I., Portsmouth, N.H., and Portland, Me., as places with interesting retail opportunities and hip populations.

Though they don’t have a timeline or place picked out for their next location, it can be assumed that Ms.

Walsh is already planning the next look. “For about a year before we opened the new store I had been pulling things out of magazines—even before we knew we were going to do this store. I had a folder called ‘the next store,’” said the fashion-forward businesswoman.


Though they have no grand plan in place, Ms. Walsh said her hope is to have 10 stores operating within the next several years and to have each retain its own individual feel.

It’s also important to the couple to find and keep an excited and knowledgeable staff for their stores, to present the same level of service the owners themselves would offer. They hold staff meetings and updates come via a bulletin board in each store. They choose to pay their staff more than they would earn at similar retail outfits and will soon offer them stock in the company.

Ms. Walsh finds human resources inspiration in companies such as

Starbucks that have a reputation for treating their staff well, making good benefits available to all, inexpensively, and providing a consistently good experience, and the staff members in each place seem happy to be there. “After a while it’s not us in the store, so how does that filter down?” asked Ms. Walsh about how the staff affects her stores and customers’ experiences.

Above all else, the couple seems genuinely thrilled to be nurturing this inspired idea together. “If we weren’t willing to take a risk, we wouldn’t be doing this. It may not be safe but it sure is fun,” said Mr. Rothschild.

The West Hartford Homeward Bound is at 77 Isham Road. It can be reached at 860-233-9500. New Milford’s location is at 24 Bank Street and can be reached at 860-350-0060. The Great Barrington store is at 325 Stockbridge Road and the number is 413-644-0099. The Web site is www.homewardboundstyle.com. 



Above, fanciful pillows and artwork at Homeward Bound.

homeward bound

blue back square • west hartford, ct • 860.233.9500
route 7, across from barrington plaza • great barrington, ma • 413.644.0099
bank street, just off the village green • new milford, ct • 860.350.0060

www.homewardboundstyle.com