



Photo by Dennis Bell

Francine Farkas Sears established her own company custom-designing and manufacturing European-style carrying cases for the American market.

Meet the 'bag lady' of Stony Creek

Francine Sears' fashion company is the word in chic accessories

By Lisa Reisman
Special to ShoreView

If you haven't heard of Francine Farkas Sears or, for that matter, of her diminutively powerful company Fabrique, Ltd., here's the skinny on the woman and her business.

She's a former New York City It girl, philanthropist, friend of the literati and glitterati, and mother of five. In her current incarnation, she's benevolent ruler of Fabrique, along with its recently created division, Women In Business, a leading international fashion and computer luggage company headquartered in an office above her garage overlooking the Thimble Islands.

She was reared in the gritty Bronx where she subsisted on her mother's gray food—a "sometimes delicious" mélange of garlic cloves, onions, and lamb fat—and grew happily into a "fat, fat kid" who favored dun-brown-colored garb.

In college, she triple-majored in marketing, men, and clothing, the vigorous pursuit of which streamlined her to her current sylph-like frame and soignée look. One semester she "forgot" to go back, instead taking a job as a receptionist at a boutique.



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Women In Business, a leading international fashion and computer luggage company is headquartered in Francine Farkas Sears home in the Thimble Islands.

Within months, she was hired to open five more.

At a party she was introduced to Alexander Farkas, eponymous president of the Alexander's chain of department stores. He asked her to go out with him on a date. There was a glitch. She couldn't go. By coincidence, some months later, George Farkas, founder of Alexander's, hired her as a fashion coordinator for Alexander's stores. He determined that she would make a good match for his son, but by that stage, it was a moot point. Francine and Alexander had fallen in love.

She resolved, with her new husband's encouragement, to immerse herself in the world of finance and promptly got herself registered as a stock broker. She then proceeded to outearn the roughly 100 men in her Wall Street office and win national recognition from Newsweek and the New York Times.

Four years later, the Alexander's Board of Directors offered her a contract to be vice president of merchandising and fashion director. Eager to stitch her acumen for finance into her abiding love of fashion, she agreed.

All the while, something kept materializing in the corner of

Bag lady: Luggage company located in Thimble Islands

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her eye. It was luggage. Living in Manhattan, she'd observed people struggling to fit heavy molded suitcases into their tiny apartments, laboring to check them in at LaGuardia or JFK. At the same time, she'd watched, on the other side of the pond, European companies designing high-end leather bags that were softer, more pliable, easier to conform to cramped spaces.

At which moment she had an epiphany. She would establish her own company that would custom-design and manufacture European-style carrying cases for the American market. The company would target smart women who were rising to executive positions in the business world without the means to afford smart accessories. These bags would be chic and well-made. They would also be reasonably priced.

She set up shop at Flying Point, her new home in Stony Creek. One day she mentioned to caretaker Mario Denardi that she was looking for an assistant to help coax along her fledging business. (Denardi, for the uninitiated, is a gardener so gifted that during ferry tours of the Thimble Islands, the grounds of the Farkas Sears home are invariably identified as "Mario's gardens.") His daughter Marie was looking for a part-time job, he told her. She was hired on the spot. A short 27 years later, Marie Denardi Gordon has risen to Fabrique's business manager, in charge of a number of major accounts, in addition to purchasing and budgetary matters, as well as the general care and feeding of clients.

Fast forward to the portable computer age of the early 1980s. Farkas Sears happened to be waiting for a flight home from Charles de Gaulle airport. In one of the display windows she saw a classic black shoulder bag made by Prada. It was attractive enough but manifestly ill-equipped to bear the weight of the still-heavy laptops of the time. The price tag read \$1295. She bought it as a business investment.

When she got back to Stony Creek, she summoned her small staff to the table in the middle of her office. In the middle of the table lay the Prada shoulder bag. The mission: to adapt this bag to the needs of women in the burgeoning computer age, to re-engineer and retrofit it, to make it functional and practical without sacrificing style and quality. Thus was born the

tasteful, durable professional cases that put Fabrique, Ltd. on the map.

And ushered in the accounts Fabrique has since won from the behemoths of the technology world—Dell, HP, Lexmark, IBM, In Focus, Kyocera, and Bose, to name a few—at the same time it regularly has outrivaled competitors 100 times its size. How to explain this? Unlike an impersonal conglomerate, there's an undeniable sense that the handful of employees takes great pride, and delight, in their work—for example, the Liberator, a laptop case with an after-hours look, complete with detachable matching purse for ditching the computer and stepping out on the town.

As for the working conditions at Fabrique: Farkas Sears is consistently described by her staff as a taskmaster. Gossiping, for example, is strictly forbidden unless, of course, she herself is included. Breaks are few except, that is, she's prepared something that everyone must sample. Which occurs, according to Marie, with some frequency.

Not to say these employees aren't motivated—indeed, self-motivated; after a while it's contagious, they say, the dedication to the quality of the product they're sending out into the world. Or that these aren't working breaks. Marie and Sharon Hippensteel, the "cog-in-the-wheel" personal assistant, trail Farkas Sears with Steno pads, pens poised to capture any idea that dashes across her mind.

At a recent lunch, conversation focused on the project of Francine's close friend, Lesley Byrne, a chocolatier, that gives proceeds, for every box of her artisanal hand-crafted chocolate sold, to a humanitarian charity supporting children, including organizations sponsoring the construction of installation of water wells in drought-ravaged Cambodia. It was unanimously decided that www.lesleyissweet.com should be added as a link to the Fabrique website, www.wib.com.

Given the ever-widening range of such projects, Farkas Sears is often interrupted before she's able to finish a sentence. It could be a conventional business crisis. Or, alternatively, she might notice a renovation on her property that calls out for attention. Perhaps it's a sea wall that, having been pounded mercilessly by a series of fierce storms, gradually weakened until one night, the confluence of a full moon and high tide caused the water to crest



Photo by Dennis Bell

Francine Farkas Sears and Mario Denardi, her beloved and talented gardener of many years. Her beautiful gardens are known as "Mario's gardens" by locals.

the wall and one part of the house to crater into the sea. At the time, Farkas Sears was going through a divorce with another husband. She had the wall shored up and rebuilt double-thick and double-deep. The marriage, she points out, did not fare as well.

Or, mid-sentence, her eye may fall on one of the dozens of framed photos populating every flat surface that is not a desk. There is Spencer, her five-year-old grandson. And Spencer's father, Alexander Farkas. That's when a guest might hear about what happened when Alexander announced his engagement to soap-opera starlet, Tamara Clatterbuck. Farkas Sears, who had never taken in a soap, enlisted the aid of her housekeeper Gladis. Together they spent hours familiarizing themselves with the sturm und drang of the characters' lives, and thus prepared, enjoyed a star-studded wedding at Flying Point.

Then there's a photo from the wedding of her daughter Georgette, director of public relations and chief spokeswoman for celebrity chef Daniel Boulud; another daughter, Cindy, a rising star in the New York commercial real-estate world; and her son Benjamin as a boy. Which leads her to a website featuring

Benjamin's annual summer Bikram yoga retreat in the South of France, including pictures of Benjamin in tortuous yoga pose, Benjamin in posture clinic, and leg of lamb prepared by Benjamin's chef whose creations, she notes, are themselves in yogic postures.

There's also a picture of the smiling Isabel Steiner, 13-year-old daughter of Michael Steiner, the renowned sculptor and Francine's partner. Isabel, as part of a school internship, recently updated sample swatches and revised the Fabrique phone directory—not to mention, with her unerring eye for fashion, consulted with staff on the youth demographic, advising an emphasis on purple and pink.

And then, five or 10 or 15 minutes after Farkas Sears has regaled her guest with those fragments of family history, there's that original sentence to complete. Which, invariably, she does.

In a way, it seems, this is symbolic of her life. Farkas Sears might forget to go back to something—for a while, at least. But it's never completely out of her vision. And chances are, when she does manage to return to it, she only makes it better.