

Catching the Wave with Style

Text by Astra C. Alegre

Hoping to fulfill a personal need, Kage Gozun and Noelle Hilario started Brown Belly clothing back in 2004. Gozun shares, "Noelle and I met through capoeira classes and surfing and started hanging out. There was one night after training that we started talking about how hard it was for both of us to find affordable beach clothing in Manila. That kind of became the springboard for Brown Belly."

Gozun came up with the name "Brown Belly" because both girls love the beach and they are both surfers. Hilario came up with their first logo, which actually featured the silhouette of a girl's bare belly. In the

beginning they were only selling beach pants. The line eventually expanded to include cover-ups and tube tops. After a year or two, the girls started making bikinis.

Neither of the girls have formal training in fashion design. Gozun shares, "We kind of learned as we went along, basing most of our designs on what we personally liked and what we thought our friends would like." Hilario adds, "When coming up with items for a new line, we do consider current fashion trends but also comfort and versatility plays a big factor in our designs. Our pieces are stylish yet comfortable as well."

Their fabrics are mostly locally sourced although from time to time they bring in imported items that they think will go over well with their customer base. Gozun shares, "I think what's most important about our products is that, except for the Thai and Indo pants and some of our dress designs, we try to keep each item in limited numbers."

Both girls handle dealing with clients via social media and try to be present at meetings with potential distributors. Hilario does the design for their logos, packaging, and does the lion's share of sourcing the fabric. Gozun, on the other hand, handles writing the copy, thinking of new promos. Everything else they try to divide equally or whoever has more time at the moment.

They have expanded their business outside of Manila and they have also done a lot of business internationally through the magic of the Internet. Last year they started selling via online retailers such as AVA.ph and Zalora, and created lines that are exclusive to each and are available only through those respective sites. Gozun shares, "We are thinking of creating a kids line as well since many of our clients are now mommies."

The best part of their job, Gozun shares, is "seeing happy clients post photos wearing our clothing and telling us how much they love it. We dressed a wedding entourage last year. That was pretty special, to know that a bride trusted us to handle the clothes for the biggest day of her life. And seeing that the baby steps we've taken are slowly paying off. Also, I can't deny that working with a good friend is always a benefit." Hilario couldn't agree more. "Working with a good friend who you share a lot of interests with is a plus. Sourcing fabrics is hard work but so much fun. I get excited seeing pretty fabric patterns, prints and colors."

For people who also want to start their own business, Gozun shares this advice: "Study your market. Do your homework. Start slowly. Baby steps worked for us. Surround yourself with people that support you and believe in what you're doing. Once you've taken that first step, keep going. Be ready to make changes if necessary but don't give up." Hilario concludes, "Do something you're passionate about. Things are more exciting when you do what you love, and it won't feel like work at all!"

(top, far left) A model wearing Coastal Coverup Pants in seafoam green. (bottom, far left) The Island Hopper Baby Doll Dress in floral blue. (top) Swim, surf or simply sunbathe wearing the Aztec bikini (left) or the Jungle bikini (right). A simple white cover-up ideal for girls who want something to wear over their swimsuits.

