

Designer jeans with an El Paso flair

The daughter of a major designer launches her own denim line for overseas

by Don Woodyard

Soffia Wardy is going global with her own line of designer denim, which bears a name that may have more impact overseas than on the border: the Original El Paso Jean Co.

Wardy is the president of the company she founded late last year. The niche she's exploring stretches from Europe to the Far East. And in that lucrative overseas market she's already finding great appeal for an El Paso-made collection that draws on the appeal and charm of clothing with the distinct style, flavor and romance of the old West.

Wardy offers an upscale line of relaxed, easy-fit and handcrafted jeans for men and women. Her boot cut, unisex jean collection "is cut for a man, attractively oversized on a woman."

The unisex line carries four different styles with names familiar to border denizens: the Cortez, Stanton, Montana and Vaquero. Two other lines of jeans are strictly for women: the Mesa and the Yandell.

Detailing is designed to make it clear that the jeans are from El Paso natives. The back pocket has an embroidered longhorn design, and the tab on the pocket says *El Paso*. The flat-head rivets are stamped with the city's name, and the company logo features a single star inside a horseshoe - El Paso's mountain star encircled by a good-

luck talisman.

She will be showing her designer lines in Germany in the spring of 1996 and is in the process of signing agreements to export to Japan.

Why get into the jeans business when so many competitors already are mass-marketing their western wear?

At first glance, all that denim looks much the same on retailers' shelves, she says, but "our quality sets us apart from others."

A confirmed workaholic, Wardy says her quest for quality translates into 50 to 70 hours on the job every week - "never a 40-hour week."

"I think it is a very tough business. To succeed you have to be willing to do what it takes. Whether it takes a million hours a week. You've got to be flexible. You are faced with problems everyday," she says.

"There has been an unbelievable response from foreign countries," Wardy says. "They love anything American."

She capitalizes on that appeal, taking it a step further to emphasize that her line of clothes is made entirely in historic and colorful El Paso.

"Wow! They are made in El Paso. How cool!" Europeans would exclaim, she says.

Wardy, who has worked overseas in buying offices

overseas for several years with her father, Amon Wardy, on the retail end of the clothing industry, says people everywhere know of El Paso and are enchanted by its reputation. "They have a real perception of El Paso as being a romantic, old West town."

"If the image of El Paso were negative, we would not get anywhere with the product," she says. The only negative comments she's received about her designer label have come from El Pasoans, who too often see their city as a dusty West Texas border town on the edge of nowhere.

Her target market is in the 18-45 age group - and definitely upscale.

"It is for people who really care about what kind of jeans they wear. They are looking at the jean not so much for the brand, but rather for something that is a little different."

In addition to the six styles of jeans, her Original El Paso line also includes caps, T-shirts and sweatshirts, and "it competes with anything out there," she says confidently.

She points out that comparable European-made jeans run around \$135 a pair. Hers are in the \$75 to \$79 range - "about 40 to 60 percent less expensive." Levis, at about \$35 a pair, "haven't been a problem."

Wardy stresses that they are made entirely in the United States and "not many companies can say that. 'I like manufacturing my clothes here because I can control the quality.'"

The quality is found in "a lot of double-stitching and double-belting to accommodate both wide and narrow belts."

She tries to keep as much of her contracting as possible in El Paso. "If it is offered here and if it is competitive, we will get it done here," she says.

Wardy loves the city and capitalizes on a positive, romantic image of El Paso and the Old West in the manufacturing process. "We have a beautiful city. We have so



Soffia Wardy

much to offer."

Wardy keeps the costs down in her manufacturing process by sharing factory space and employees with her mother, Lorraine Wardy, the internationally successful owner of Lorraine Wardy Enterprises, a designer clothing operation. Mother and daughter are vice presidents in each other's firms. Sofia likes the arrangement. Her mother gives her "my own space to make mistakes."

She adds that her mother has also saved her from mistakes. "She will walk by and say, 'Why don't you do it this way.' She is always there to give me advice, telling me how to do something a little bit better."

The advice her mother offered when her daughter was preparing to start her own company was: "Are you sure you want to get into this business? It's a tough business. Mother says you must be prepared to work and do whatever it takes to make the compa-

ny happen."

Soffia is sure.

"It runs in my blood: My father is a retailer. My mother is a manufacturer. Between the two of them I couldn't get out of it." Smiling, she jokes, "It's definitely in the jeans."

Sharing a factory with her mother has a financial benefit as well for Sofia, who is the only salaried employee of her company.

"I contract (with) her employees to do the work I need done. It is a wonderful way for both of us. If any of her employees have any down time, I keep them busy. I am not incurring a huge overhead in payroll until the company is on its feet."

"It is ideal for both of us."

Original El Paso Jeans does not have an El Paso outlet, but "we'd like to sell it at retail in local stores," Sofia says.

"If we are not picked up by a local retailer, then we will open our own store, maybe next year."

Original
El Paso
Jean Co.



Original El Paso Jean Co.

President: Soffia Wardy.

Location: 180 N. Langtry, El Paso.

Founded: 1994.

Number of Employees: 1 (Soffia Wardy is her company's only full-time employee. She contracts out apparel work with her mother's employees in same building.)

Sales: Start-up company; sales data unavailable.

Expansion strategy: Europe and Far East.