

# ¡AY, CHIHUAHUA!

A CREATIVE BUSINESS by Claire-France Perez

**I** had an undeclared major in the Liberal Arts," admits fashion designer Tracy Hansen, one of a team of four friends — average age, 28 — that started a Berkeley, California fashion sensation called Chihuahua! back in 1980.

None of this team had any inkling of what they would do when they "grew up." A friendship took their careers an unusual route — no interviews in personnel offices or answering of newspaper ads.

Debbie Moore, now thirty, is the quartet's textile designer, responsible for the eye-popping printed designs that impel Chihuahua! fashions into the closets of renegade trendlovers. Moore allows her skills are self-taught. "I go for the thing

that keeps me the most entertained," she says. Although she is involved in the current primitive trend, Moore says her upcoming collections will evolve beyond it.

The Chihuahua! (pronounced Chee-wa-wa) group originally started as an energetic foursome of friends. Katrine Thomas (now 27), the business manager, planted the seed when she suggested to then-painter Moore her work might sell better if it were printed on a t-shirt.

Moore, then 26, disagreed. It was the first business conflict that occurred between the not-yet-partners, but the solution was a creative blend of art and management.

Moore explains, "It would have involved too many colors for our collective \$80, so we just took another route." Narrowing the colors to just simply black, the entrepreneurial pair embarked on their first product: hearts, restyled into a leopard print, for Valen-

tine's Day.

"Suddenly we wound up in business," recalls Moore.

Enter Tracy Hansen, then 22 years old. Her primitive-inspired clothing shapes were the fashion influence that blasted Thomas and Moore's t-shirt origins into ancient history. Hansen's daring silhouettes won the new trio respect and attention from the retail world. Stores could now carry a whole line instead of unrelated items.

What might have continued as a flurry of fashion self-indulgence was carried back down to earth by the fourth new partner in the group: the level-headed Teresa Haedt. Her pricing and production talents shaped the company's profit structure and led the balance sheets to financial solvency.

Tracy Hansen remembers being warned about the potential grief of going into business with friends. Yet, she says, "Starting out as friends and ending up in business is great. In spite of the 'fear factor' there is a sense of unity that never knew what that fear was."

Hansen summarizes the difference between their friendship and their professional relationships: "The personal relationship and the personal obligation and responsibility are the same thing. Conflicts aren't a threat to the consensus, they are a normal function of a creative business."

Claire-France Perez, a fashion writer and former editor of *Apparel News*, knows a sharp look when she sees one.

**Right: This faux bijou (false jewelry) print is hand-silkscreened in gold ink over black cotton jersey, with shirred sleeves and sides producing its contoured hemline. Left: Chihuahua's charm — and business sense — derives from these four. Teresa Haedt and Katrine Thomas (standing), Tracy Hansen (seated) and Debbie Moore (seated on floor).**

