

Gracia Hemans-Martin & Jason Winnie

Grassillini Creations & Artisan Leatherworks by Jason Winnie

Gracia Hemans-Martin came to the US four years ago with a talent and a dream. In her native Jamaica, Ms. Hemans-Martin had been leather artist for twenty years, creating custom items for people or selling items of her own design.

“I’m your leather genie” she has a habit of saying “I can make anything you want out of leather”

The walls of her store certainly seem to agree with her. Hanging from the hooks are the expected handbags, belts, and sandals bearing some of her trademark workmanship, but a closer inspection reveals more unique pieces like animal figurines, bathing suits, and decorative masks all made out of leather.

“I love working with leather, and I’ve been doing it basically all my life. It’s such a versatile and durable material and you can use it for a lot of things you would never imagine”



We all might start knowing more about it soon. Ms. Hemans-Martin has been on a bit of a roll recently. After spending a few years working in a leather shop and vending some of her designs at craft fairs she opened her own store, Grassillini Creations, on Main street in East Hartford in May. She sells items of her own design, does custom work and repairs, and has a few Jamaican products and works by Caribbean artists as well.

The store is colorful and busy, an artistic environment that was important to Ms. Hemans-Martin when she was designing the store. She understands it to be crucial to her creative process. “I love sitting down with a pile of leather and just creating things” she says “I could never imagine doing anything else”

Certainly not lacking in skill as an artist, Ms. Hemans-Martin took a course at The Entrepreneurial Center to learn more of the management elements of her potential business. She was employed as a leather worker at the time, but she knew that having her own business would eventually be the best way to take advantage of her unique talents. She took the course to familiarize herself with the process to managing a business. “I had run a store in Jamaica, but I knew there would be differences here. I just walked down to the Center and I liked what the programs looked like, so I signed up there and then. I guess I was in the right place at the right time.”

She continues, “At first I was very overwhelmed with all the classes and all the information we were given. I kept wondering how I was going to remember it all. But I kept all the information and as I’ve been in business, I started understanding everything better and seeing just how applicable everything was. Now I refer to the information that they gave me all the time, and the business plan I wrote in the program is basically the same one I use now.”

While still a fairly small operation, Grassillini Creations has a bright future. It is beginning to attract a fairly regular clientele, and the word of mouth about the custom work is attracting people from as far away as New York. Sales are increasing slowly but surely, and Ms. Hemans-Martin has already been able to invest more in her store as her numbers keep improving.

As part of her increasing her product line, she has recently added some pieces by another local leather artist, Jason Winnie, to her selection. Mr. Winnie was taught leather working by his grandfather, and his pieces also show a rare degree of workmanship. He also took the comprehensive course at The Entrepreneurial Center, and has formalized his business a great deal as a result.

“I have a few big contracts pending” says Mr. Winnie “It’s difficult for people to get specific leather pieces, so there’s a lot of work for someone like me who can create what people are looking for. There are a few growth markets out there now that I’m trying to get into. Motorcycle seats for example. I’ve been recreating civil war pieces recently, and I’m working with a company that may be interested in me doing some pieces from the French-and-Indian war. Leather art is a great way for someone to get something unique and timeless.”

With the help of Mr. Winnie and Grassillini Creations, East Hartford might well become the first stop for any leather aficionados in the area. Certainly, their customers have all thought it worth the trip so far. Not bad for the first three months of business.

