

First birthday celebrations heralding in a new wave of inclusivity in adaptive fashion

Most parents are just ecstatic to survive the months leading up to their child's first birthday. But for Brisbane-based adaptive clothing label Founder, Jessie Sadler, her business baby has not just survived launching during a global pandemic, it's thrived.

Since opening its online doors in March 2020, Christina Stephens has graced runways at Brisbane Fashion Month, London Fashion Week, co-chaired panels on diversity and inclusion, and has been featured on 7News, Studio 10 and a number of disability-focussed podcasts.

Founder Jessie Sadler says despite launching the label in the midst of a global pandemic, she counts their first year of operation a success.

"Our mission from the start was to design and create beautiful adaptive clothing that gives women living with disabilities a choice to feel confident and empowered in clothing that looks as good as it feels," says Jessie.

"In our first year of operation, we've managed to do all of this, plus take on board customer feedback and launch new sizing. We've just released an extended size range for the classic collection, now catering for sizes 8-22.

With almost 20% of the population living with a disability, making adaptive fashion sexier and more accessible is something that's not just idealistic for Jessie, it's crucial for the survival of the fashion industry.

"Being able to accurately represent and provide more fashion options for a fifth of the population is something that's close to my heart, but also something that needs to be better reflected across all industries, from employment, to media coverage, to supermarket chains - every brand needs to reflect one fifth of the population.

"Inclusion isn't just a buzzword, it's something that as a society, we need to take action on."

Jessie believes that a big piece of this puzzle is understanding what people living with disabilities need, and what systems and programs can support these needs.

"Our clothing becoming fundable by NDIS was also a game changer for us, and for our customers. Each year there's \$11 billion of unspent NDIS funds, so being able to give our customers even more choice in their purchasing decisions really meant a lot to us.

"We know we're on the brink of something big here - inclusive fashion is where plus sized and maternity clothing was 15 years ago. The demand just keeps growing! I'm proud of the team, and so grateful to our customers who've been on the journey with us."

But the past year hasn't been without its struggles...

On top of the impact of COVID-19, the company has had to contend with a lack of professional models with disabilities, as well as criticism for not authentically representing their customers.

"Even though our clothes are designed for able-bodied women as well, we often cop a lot of flack online for not always using models with disabilities. We absolutely want to showcase real women with real disabilities and challenges, and show other women out there what's available to them, but the reality is, it's really difficult finding the right people to help us do that. There's a severe lack of professional talent who represent our unique customers, making our job extremely hard to do authentically."

The Christina Stephens difference

But those who have purchased Christina Stephens clothing have been thoroughly impressed.

"I love the fact these garments are made from natural fibres. They feel divine on. Each piece has been thought out well. My favourite piece...mmm nope I don't have a favourite," says Tracey Jackson.

After watching her mother, a very fashion forward and health conscious woman, struggle to dress herself after injuring both elbows in a fall, and seeing the lack of options for women with physical challenges, Jessie was spurred into action to design beautiful, adaptive clothing.

Every Christina Stephens piece has been thoughtfully designed in Australia and tested by real women with an eye for style and a desire for versatile clothing that allows for freedom of movement and expression. Minimalist in philosophy and design, our focus is on clean lines, flattering cuts and colours, minimal trims, and basic pieces that can be worn and accessorised with ease.

Christina Stephens' next big, hairy, audacious goal is to get a foot in the door with major Australian retailers like Myer and David Jones.

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