

Ruff Ruff Couture



By Lauren Hulbert

Jaimie Pergament grew up around a sewing machine. Her grandmother was a fashion designer in the 30's and 40's; creating beaded dresses that would qualify as today's vintage glamour. Pergament developed a fascination, fixated on watching her grandmother sew on her sewing machine, and her mother was a model in the fashion industry. It should come as no surprise that she ended up in the fashion world, creating the canine fashion line, Ruff Ruff Couture.



An entrepreneur since before she was in high school, Pergament has been combining her business mind with her flair for fashion since the age of 13. "I guess I've always had that entrepreneurial gene in me. When the movie *Flashdance* came out, I made headbands with pins and ribbons and I would sell them to all of my friends because I was too young to sell to stores," Pergament said of her first business venture. While most young people would be intimidated to go to stores, by age 16, Pergament was selling a jewelry line of vintage beads and sterling silver she started with a friend.

While Pergament's ultimate desire was to be a clothing designer, her practical side won out in college and Pergament graduated from the University of Southern California with a degree in journalism. "Even though [designing] was a passion of mine, I wanted to have a career where I didn't have to worry about whether or not I would make it," Pergament recalled about the decision to switch majors. "The rest of my family is in business fields, so I thought that it was the smart decision."

The job Pergament ended up with was at pop culture television network E!, where she started at the bottom as a production assistant and worked her way up to executive producer. Her desire to be around fashion was kismet as she helped E! launch sister station the Style Network, where Pergament oversaw all of the fashion and beauty programming. "I was always around the style and the clothing so it was always feeding my creative nature," Pergament said.

Pergament grew up with dogs that she enjoyed dressing up. When she was a little girl, she was mom to a black schnauzer she named Heidi, which she

dressed up in baby clothes and would wheel around in a buggy. After she was married, she adopted Francis, an Italian Greyhound and then another Italian Greyhound, Daphne, to keep him company. Her idea to create clothes for her dogs originated out of frustration. "It's really hard to find anything for Italian Greyhounds to wear because they have a very strange body type," Pergament said. "It's very different now, dog accessories have moved from a novelty into the mainstream. Dog fashion has become so big its part of culture. Five and six years ago, there really wasn't any fashion or dog clothing out there, and because I'm very into fashion, I wanted them to look cute."

After coming up with a pattern that would fit them properly, Pergament started making clothing solely for her two dogs out of vintage fabrics, inspired by her favorite designer Nanette Lepore. Involved in several Italian Greyhound rescue groups, when other breed owners saw her dogs sporting beautiful apparel, the group's desire for their own dogs to be wearing the clothes was immediate.

"At first I was like, 'I'm just going to make them for Italian Greyhounds.' So I started donating them to charities and they became really popular in the breed set. Then one of my friends said to me, 'If you're serious about this, you can't have a business and just design for the breed.'"

With professional designers amongst her friends from her television contacts, Pergament showed them her canine outfits for their advice, and was met with approval and encouragement. Her first big break came from a friend with a golden opportunity. "A friend of mine asked if I wanted to come with her to her Academy Awards suite and set up my clothing so all these celebrities would come and see them. At the time, people thought doing dog clothing was a real novelty. I didn't have anything I could even give away, it was really just for people to come and see them. So we set up this booth and all the celebrities were like 'this is so great.'"

Pergament's second big break came from the form of celeb-tante and party princess, Paris Hilton. "I met Paris and she said 'these coats are so great. Can you make one for me for this reality show I'm going to be doing?'" I said sure, and I didn't think anything of it. So I made the coat for her and I sort of forgot about it because several months went by." It wasn't until the first episode of *The Simple Life* aired in the winter of 2003 that Pergament's memory was jogged with a jolt. "In the opening scene of the show, they showed Paris' dog Tinkerbelle running across the grass and she was wearing my coat and I couldn't believe it. It was a real big thing for us."

With the boost that *The Simple Life* gave Ruff Ruff Couture in the public, Pergament developed other products including T-shirts and dresses and started selling them to stores, as well as picked up more than 40 clients at an industry trade show. By then, Pergament had already scaled back her producing job to freelancing and at the time was the senior producer and the supervising producer for the second and third season respectively on Tyra Banks' *America's Next Top Model*. It was soon very apparent that she would need to put her television career on hold to keep up with her mounting orders. "I haven't given up TV," Pergament warned. "I don't like to say 'gave up'. I say I 'put it aside for a while.' I still consult on various shows on the side in my spare time."

Despite her previous career in the high pressure television industry, Pergament found it challenging to go into stores and pitch herself and the Ruff Ruff Couture line. She had luck on her side, however,

because as she went from store to store with the apparel in her vintage trunk, most stores made purchases.

"I think it's definitely easier to produce a television show, which is not easy, than a fashion line. I did the fashion week coverage for E! and we would produce two hours a day of programming. We would shoot the stuff, we have a huge team and it would be written and edited and aired the next day. Essentially you don't sleep for seven days. With a show like *Top Model*, its seven days a week, 20 hours a day, you don't talk to anyone else, you have no life at all, and it's really crazy. People definitely don't realize what its like to do a reality show. Producing dog clothing is very different, even from producing people clothing, and is more challenging in a different way. With fashion, there's a learning curve on dealing with all the different facets that make it happen. I'm crazy about details like stitching. It will keep me up at night. My whole life I've been used to being in control of things,

like being in charge of television production, I had control over that."

The details that Pergament obsesses over have made the Ruff Ruff Couture line a hit, and vindication has come in the form of celebrities joining her growing fan base. Along with Paris Hilton, Hilary and Haylie Duff, Paula Abdul, and Jennifer Love Hewitt have all dressed their dogs in Ruff Ruff Couture. Pergament continues to update items in the collection, producing for the seasons and consistently keeping her ear close to the ground for the latest trends. The ambition that has driven her to this level of success keeps her mind focused on the next step.

"When I first started, most people who were not from Los Angeles or New York thought it was a bit odd. But now all these big brands are getting in on it, so it's only gotten bigger and the industry will continue to do so. The reactions that I have gotten from people when I tell them what I do have changed so much over the past few years. I look at Nanette Lepore's line and I think to myself 'if my clothes could be as great as hers then I've done a really good job.' I'm going to continue to do what we do and try to make it better because every day you learn something new." 🐾

