

SUMMER 2019

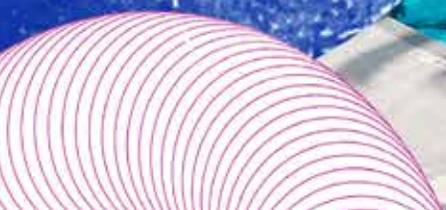
CONNECTING YOU TO THE CENTER OF HOUSTON

downtown



THE RIGHT STUFF

THE PEOPLE AND
EVENTS THAT HAVE
SHAPED HOUSTON





Being the Change They Want to See

On a rainy Saturday morning, Lila Mankad and her best friend Caoilin Krathaus stand outside the open garage doors of CORE Design Studio on Aurora Street in the Heights. Strwn across the sidewalk are myriad banners in various states of disarray. Some are dusty with grime from being outside for so long. Others have their edges curled up, casualties of wind and wear and tear. Amid the piles, their messages still speak.

Thin as hibiscus petals, our skirts swirl up as we swing and turn reads one credited to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *A shelter of live oaks ... a dark billowing ceiling held up by tortuous beams*, this from Brad Hipps.

And then, with the grinding whirr of an engine starting and a hiss of water, the girls begin power washing the words, the water spattering with a staccato rhythm against the banners lying on the sidewalk on an overcast Houston spring day.

Until recently, the banners they're cleaning flew from poles all over Downtown, part of the Figurative Poetics banner program, which uses

words and phrases from writers, celebrities and citizens to help tell the story of their personal experiences of the city. There may be commentary on what it's like to be an Astros fan, or how hot the summers can get. There are whimsical looks at the lives of the well-loved dogs living Downtown, and there are thoughtful expressions of Houston's place in a global world.

But on this day, those banners are headed for a different life. Caoilin and Lila are upcycling them into reusable shopping bags.

"The process takes a lot longer than we thought," muses Lila, moving her dark hair out of her eyes.

"We get the banners from Downtown [Management District] and then we have to power wash them," echoes Caoilin, wearing a straw fedora and flashing a bright grin.

"Yeah, we clean them," clarifies Lila.

"And so do brothers, sisters, friends and parents," teases Alan Krathaus, Caoilin's dad, as the girls nod, grinning at his tone.

**TWO BEST
FRIENDS
SPEARHEAD
UPCYCLING
EFFORT
FOR A BETTER
HOUSTON**

By Holly Beretto



Lila and Caoilin met at a Writers in the Schools Camp when they were in the second grade. Now, seventh graders at Hogg Middle School, they are four years into a project that began if not exactly on a whim, certainly not without a defined plan. The girls and their families live a few streets over from each other in the Heights, a Houston enclave long known for its tree-lined boulevards dotted with Craftsman homes and reimagined townhouses, a place where artists and entrepreneurs live side by side, united by their love of the neighborhood's funky past and gentrified present. The girls would often play in Woodland Park along Little White Oak Bayou. They loved that it was a cool, green oasis in Houston's hot, busy sprawl.

"We were walking in the park, and Little White Oak Bayou runs right through it and we noticed there was a lot of trash," says Caoilin.

"And we noticed a large amount of the trash was plastic bags," breaks in Lila. "It's packed in the ground like a layer in the earth. It's spongy like a mattress. We love playing there and seeing the animals splash around, but it was really sad about the plastic bags."

So, the two then-fourth graders decided to take action. They started a petition that would encourage the City of Houston to ban the use of plastic bags, and generated hundreds of signatures on it. The number of signatures increased even more after a report about the girls' efforts aired on KPRC-TV. But they realized that even as they were asking people to join their cause, that banning plastic might not be enough. What if they could show people another alternative?

Two years after their petition campaign, when they were in the sixth grade, the idea to encourage people to use reusable bags was born.

"We thought it would be really cool to upcycle the old poetry banners" says Lila who goes on to explain, "Upcycling is when you use something for something else, when you make it in to a new product."

The pair tried to sew the bags themselves, but Caoilin admits with a laugh "that didn't work out so well." They enlisted the help of The Community Cloth, a Houston nonprofit and microenterprise initiative that encourages refugee women to start their own businesses as artists. They receive training and peer support, and their efforts help them and their families find their financial footing in their new home. The women create scarves and shawls, bags, home goods and knitted items to sell online and at area fairs. That's where they met Khatera Khorushan, originally from Afghanistan, who now sews their bags.

"She has such a good eye for color and design," says Caoilin. "She cuts the banners in weird ways to make the bags."

"the world was looking to hear young people's voices"





And while bag owners may not realize it, they're carrying a little piece of Downtown with them—and helping to save the bayous.

Once the girls give her the raw materials, she stitches them into shopping bags that measure about 14 inches by 14 inches. Each is unique, with different words and photos from the Figurative Poetics banners making their way onto the bags.

The bags are available for sale on Caoilin and Lila's website, bagfreebayous.org. They maintain the site, writing descriptions of each bag and taking photos of it. They also give each one a unique name. There's *Mango Sunrise*, an orange bag with splashes of pink, and *Infinite Jester*, a blue bag with pink handles that shows the image of smiling guy in a striped shirt. Once bags are purchased, they can either be picked up at CORE Design Studio, or the girls will ship the bags to their new owners.

The whole effort is a lot of work, and it's not all that Caoilin and Lila do. They've gone to Austin to testify in front of the Legislature about the need for banning plastic bags (to date, there is no law in Texas banning the use of plastic bags in any city). They've received grants from the Pollination Project, which awards monies to changemakers around the globe tackling problems to make the world a better place. Caoilin and Lila put that grant money back into their business. Neither girl takes a fee for her work—it's strictly volunteer—so the cash paid for supplies for Khatera (who is paid for her work and keeps the earnings from bag sales as well). Another Pollination Project grant will go to the girls' newest initiative, a website that will rank Houston restaurants based on how environmentally friendly they are.

Neither Caoilin or Lila set out to be leaders in the sustainability movement. Caoilin likes riding her bike around her neighborhood; Lila enjoys reading and playing Dungeons and Dragons. But, Lila notes, "the world was looking to hear young people's voices," about how to change things for the future.

The pair figure they've logged about 500 hours so far, and with all the banners outside the design studio (which is owned by Caoilin's parents and also does the design work for this magazine), that number is set to increase. They juggle their sustainability efforts with their school work, and don't have any plans to stop. They've sold 160 bags so far and are nearly sold out of their current stock.

"I love how much they support each other," says Miah Arnold, Lila's mom, of the girls' partnership. "And seeing how they've learned to be cooperative to make something strong you couldn't make yourself."

And even as the pair continues to push for the elimination of plastic bags, and take part in bayou cleanups, they will continue to collect banners past their prime, clean them up and give them to Khatera.

"With every batch, we're just more amazed at how she can put together a bag into a piece of art," says Lila.

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