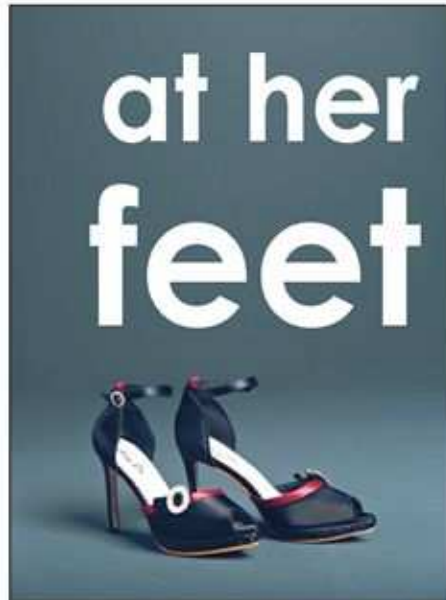


a woman with the world



story by MICHAEL KORB

If there's one thing in particular to like about Sonja Dee Eckardt, it's that she's set her sights low. That's not to say she isn't ambitious, but rather that the Spa City native tends to focus her attention on things at ground level. You see, while most of us are looking people in the eye, Eckardt is looking all the way down — at their feet.

Though it might be a bit of an exaggeration to say she has a shoe fetish, the facts remain that she repurposed her life after her father's death to follow a dream of creating her own line of shoes. All of her efforts culminate this month with the launch of the luxury shoe line bearing her name, Sonja Dee. ►

AUDREY

This sleek, closed toe stiletto is made of Italian silk, with a delicate repeating floral interspersed with tiny clusters of leaves set against a nude-colored background. This shoe comes in two other colors: two-toned blue (Sky and Ocean), and cherry red — both against a nude background. With a square, skinny 4-inch heel, Audrey has all the gentle sophistication of one of history's most beloved style icons: Audrey Hepburn.



Inspired by the glamour of old Hollywood, the spring/summer line of Sonja Dee consists of five stunning designs crafted from the finest luxury materials Italy has to offer — like supple calf skin, fine silks, snake skins, satin and Swarovski crystals.

Her overnight success story only took nine years to happen.

For all intents and purposes, the 1992 Saratoga Central Catholic grad seemed to have life by the tail after getting a bachelor's degree in nursing from Russell Sage. She worked as an orthopedic nurse in Albany and Seattle and loved every aspect of it. But when her father, Frank Petar, suffered critical injuries from an accident at work, she realized she needed to follow her heart.

"It was a very hard time for me," says the charming and stylish Eckardt. "I just woke up one day and realized I needed to follow my passion. My father always taught me to go for your dreams and leave no rock unturned. 'You want to live life to the fullest.'"

Though she loved nursing, she was passionate about fashion — particularly shoes. In fact, her closet held literally hundreds of pairs of shoes.

It's an obsession she comes by naturally — her mother, Franka, used to mow the lawn in high heels.

"My mom always says, 'You've got to look good no matter what,'" laughs Eckardt.

So Sonja began researching everything there was to know about shoe design and manufacturing.

"I basically learned from scratch," she says. "When my father died, that's when I really took it seriously and worked hard at it and put pencil to paper. I started to sketch, took a lot of books out of the library and read, read, read. And I would practice and practice sketching every day."

It was at that time she reconnected

VERONICA

These sexy snake skin sandals have a 4-inch-square skinny heel. The aesthetic symmetry of Veronica is remarkable with a gold metallic foot bed and a crystal buckle and ankle strap. Veronica is all about glitz and gold and is as utterly unforgettable as screen legend Veronica Lake.



with her high school sweetheart, Eric Eckardt, who was working as an investment banker in Manhattan. She took a job at the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, and the pair soon married. They realized they preferred to raise a family in Saratoga Springs and moved back to the area, where Eric started Empire Home Realty. Their daughter, Sophia, arrived in September of 2005, and Sonja kept sketching shoes.

"I would even pull out the sketch pad when my daughter would fall asleep," says Eckardt.

But by the end of 2006, she decided it was time to stop thinking and sketching and start doing — to go after her dream and leave no rock unturned. She pinpointed four manufacturers in Italy and traveled to Milan, Bologna and Tuscany to learn as much about the process as possible.

"Once I had my business plan down and felt good about the sketches, I had to get a sense of the certain fabrics I wanted," she says. "I knew what I wanted, but I had to touch and feel it, so I got in touch with four manufacturers in Italy.

"I got a feel for the language of shoe making and textiles and fabrics and the people who do this kind of work," Eckardt says of her trip. "It was an amazing experience that made me love shoes all the more."

From the mold to the last buckle, she participated in every step of the process.

"They instructed me at each station and let me do it myself," she says. "This also was the case with the textiles and the heels — there are manufacturers that just make heels alone."

After more research, Eckardt found suppliers for all the materials in Italy but decided on a manufacturer in Asia. Now, nine years since the passing of her father, her dream becomes a reality with the shoes you see here, inspired by Hollywood styles of the 1940s and '50s. In fact, four of the five styles are named after iconic movie stars:



SOPHIA

Made of the finest Italian calf's leather, this open-toe stunner features a sophisticated appliqué leather floral design of red petals, green outer leaves and a center of Swarovski crystals. Sophia has a 4 1/2-inch skinny, square heel, made of calf's leather but giving the appearance of wood. With scalloped edges, Sophia contains all the flair and panache of Rome and the style icon Sophia Loren.



FRANCESCA

This shoe's name is the exception among the five. Francesca is named after Sonja's mother, whom Sonja credits with being her most important fashion inspiration. Francesca is made of embossed alligator leather with a narrow square, open toe and 4-inch heel. In black, nude or chocolate brown, Swarovski crystals run along its strap as well as the buckle.



MARILYN

A narrow open-toe stiletto made of Italian two-tone satin with a cherry red Swarovski crystal strap and a delicate round buckle of four layers of crystals and a gold-toned metal center. The 4½-inch skinny black heel is covered in Swarovski crystals. Marilyn also comes in nude with a sky blue strap. This jewel of a design suggests the saying made famous by Hollywood goddess Marilyn Monroe: "Diamonds are a girl's best friend."



Want a pair?

Sonja Dee shoes can be purchased:

- ♦ through the Web site: www.SonjaDee.com
- ♦ at select stores this year

Prices range from \$380 to \$450.

Audrey, Marilyn, Sophia, Veronica. (The fifth is named after her mother, Francesca.)

"I've always loved the old classic movies," Eckardt says. "It was a time when women were so beautiful and classy ... it just draws me in: the way they presented themselves, the way they wore their hair, the way they dressed with everything so fitted.

"But shoes were always the love for me. I feel you can dress any way you want — casual or dressy, informal or formal and just throw on a beautiful pair of high stilettos and you feel beautiful and strong and sexy.

"Shoes can change a woman." ❄