From majestic downtown to Capitol Hill, over to Fremont and Ballard, up Queen Anne, down highway 99 to West Seattle, and south to Georgetown, privately owned shops and specialty stores have been cropping up faster than you can say “I shall never go to Southcenter Mall again.” Even better, some are owned by your fellow Loggers. And whether they were thrust into it, born to do it, or just plain refused to ever get a regular job, these six UPS alumni entrepreneurs are open for business and hoping you’ll drop by.

Text by Stacey Wilson
Photos by Ross Mulhausen
Working at Adidas for eight years left Portland native Eric Akines with more than just closets full of free tennies and track jackets. As a globe-trotting merchandising manager for the company’s Originals stores, Akines’ vision of running his own shop slowly morphed from dream to reality.

“I was lucky in that I’d had a lot of experience setting up shop and a really clear idea of what I wanted,” says Akines, 33, of Polite Society, the 3,000-sq.-ft. clothing and home-furnishings boutique he opened last summer just blocks from Pike Place Market. “I envisioned a high-end Anthropologie for men and women, with a huge focus on the shopping experience.” If you are in the market for luxury retail (let’s just say prices are more SoHo than Seattle), you’re in for a treat. The gorgeously designed space—think Pier 1 as re-imagined by Louis XIV—features casual and formal fashions and accessories for men and women by French, Norwegian, Argentinean, Swedish, German, Spanish, and Irish designers, 90 percent of which you can’t find anywhere else in Seattle.

“Because of this, we really encourage people to come in and try stuff on,” says Akines, reinforcing his politeness-is-paramount business philosophy. “We’re honored to have you stop by!”

OWNER: ERIC AKINES ’96
Store Name: Polite Society
The Goods: Clothing/accessories for men and women; home furnishings, gifts
Location: 1924 First Ave., Seattle (Downtown)
Web page: www.shoppolitesociety.com
If you took a slice of charming old Brooklyn and transplanted it in South Seattle, you’d have Georgetown: a once mostly industrial community that’s become the city’s hottest district for new businesses. (Locals will be quick to tell you that Georgetown was actually the first official settlement in King County, circa 1850, thank you very much.) So there was no better location for Holly Krejci and her partner, Kathy Nyland, to open their kooky brainchild, George, a gallery-style gift shop whose playful trinkets are out-charmed only by the store’s friendly atmosphere. “People come in sometimes just to find out what’s happening in the neighborhood,” says Krejci, 32, who took the retail leap with Nyland in July 2004 when a video store near their house went out of business. “We’ve been called ‘The Georgetown Clubhouse,’” she says. “People come in for free advice, and hopefully they’ll buy something too!” How could they not? Between the lime-green walls is an impressive collection of knickknacks, including hand-carved wooden cars and trucks for kids (courtesy of Krejci’s dad), Chinese lanterns, scarves made from recycled cashmere, small metal purses shaped like dogs (yes you read that right), and the store’s signature contribution to neighborhood pride. “Our T-shirt that says ‘Georgetown…not just for hookers anymore’ is our best seller,” says Krejci, laughing. “What can I say? Our customers have good taste.”
As West Seattle institutions go, Capers is king. A beloved lunch and coffee joint (it was the very first retailer to serve espresso in the ‘hood), venue for local artists, and leader in community fundraising, the California Avenue fixture has also been the go-to store for kitchen, home-entertainment, and household essentials since it opened in 1985. And now with a two-year-old, second store in Fremont gaining momentum, Capers, says owner Lisa Myers, has officially made good on its name. “Yes, it has definitely been an adventure, which is why our name works so well!” says West Seattleite Myers, 48, admitting the store has shape-shifted with changing tastes and demands. “Our customers have been very patient with us, as we’re always experimenting with what sells and what price points are fair and reasonable.” Tools for the pro (or amateur) home entertainer are huge hits, including custom-designed furniture for inside and out, bar stools, and abundant books on food and wine, just to name a few. “We are not an overly ‘precious’ store,” says Myers, wincing at some retailers’ lack of appreciation for the tighter-budgeted. “Sure, we have bigger, fancier things, but we’re happy if you come in for bath stuff, a gift, or lunch. We want you to have an enjoyable experience so you’ll think of us in the future.”
Much like the exotic rugs and carpets in its collection, Pande Cameron’s Seattle store is a jewel off the beaten path. Nestled between Lake Union and downtown, the family-owned emporium’s class-and-swank factor is palpable the minute you enter the majestic, two-floor showroom. Co-owner Brad Andonian, whose Armenian immigrant grandfather, Mihran Paul Andonian, was hired by the then-fledgling import company in 1929, says the only thing rarer in Seattle than a privately owned floor-covering store these days is one that’s three-generations strong. “We’ve been around 83 years,” says Andonian, 39, a onetime stockbroker and married father of two. “While most of our competition has been around five or seven years, we’ve actually grown up here. We’re part of Seattle’s fabric.” In a retail climate where “high-end” has been replaced by cheap knockoffs, Pande Cameron is indeed singular. In stock are a minimum of 4,000 rugs and carpets from India, Pakistan, and Turkey, to name a few, with prices ranging from $1,400 to $125,000. “Our mission is to carry only the finest hand-knotted carpets,” says Andonian, acknowledging that Pande Cameron isn’t likely the first stop for recent college grads looking to furnish studio apartments. “But we’re looking to attract a whole new generation of shoppers, especially UPS alums. They know quality when they see it.”
Nabil Ayers admits Sonic Boom’s back story should probably be better than it is. “People expect me to say I dreamed of opening a record store my whole life,” says Ayers, chuckling, “but it really came down to that sick feeling in my stomach at the thought of working in an office, so my friend and I said, ‘Hey let’s open a record store!’” Ten years later, Sonic Boom is one of the city’s most enduring reminders of a world before Wal-Mart ruled the music marketplace. With three thriving locations—in Ballard, Capitol Hill, and Fremont, which is the flagship shop, soon to be joined by an all-vinyl annex)—Sonic Boom has such a loyal following that Ayers himself is sometimes shocked. “I’m still amazed at what a great music city Seattle is and how it’s so supportive of indie business,” says NYC native Ayers, 35, who also manages to tour the world with his band TLV, run the record label, The Control Group, and do A&R for Epic Records. “People feel that buying a record should be an experience, and that’s great for us.” Between packed in-store performances by bands like The Shins and Death Cab for Cutie, and paying customers like Dave Matthews, the Sonic Boom story has gone from lark to local legend.
Stephanie Hargrave sometimes has to remind herself who’s in charge at smallclothes. “The kids think it’s their store,” she says, smiling, as some local munchkins play hide-and-seek in the circular racks. “But I don’t mind. I’m glad people feel comfortable here. My customers are my friends.” If you frequent West Seattle’s main drag, California Avenue, you’ve probably seen Hargrave’s resale shop and not even known it. Located inside the quaint purple house near Hanford Street, smallclothes is a still-evolving enterprise for 38-year-old artist Hargrave (she lives and paints next door) and her mother, Ruth, who opened the shop together in April 2005. But it’s not your grandma’s consignment store. “We’re really more than that because we’re very selective—a wonderful alternative to inflated mall prices,” says Hargrave of the furniture, toys, and clothes she sells for kids ages 0 to 12. (She’s right: It’s not unusual to find almost-new baby and infant outfits for around eight bucks.) Aside from mint-condition merchandise sold to her by discerning neighborhood moms and dads, Hargrave also sells Jack and Lily shoes, Kate Quinn Organics clothes, and BabyLegs leg warmers, all current favorites of the hip-parent set. “I swear, everyone in this neighborhood is pregnant or has small kids,” she says. “And I couldn’t be happier!”