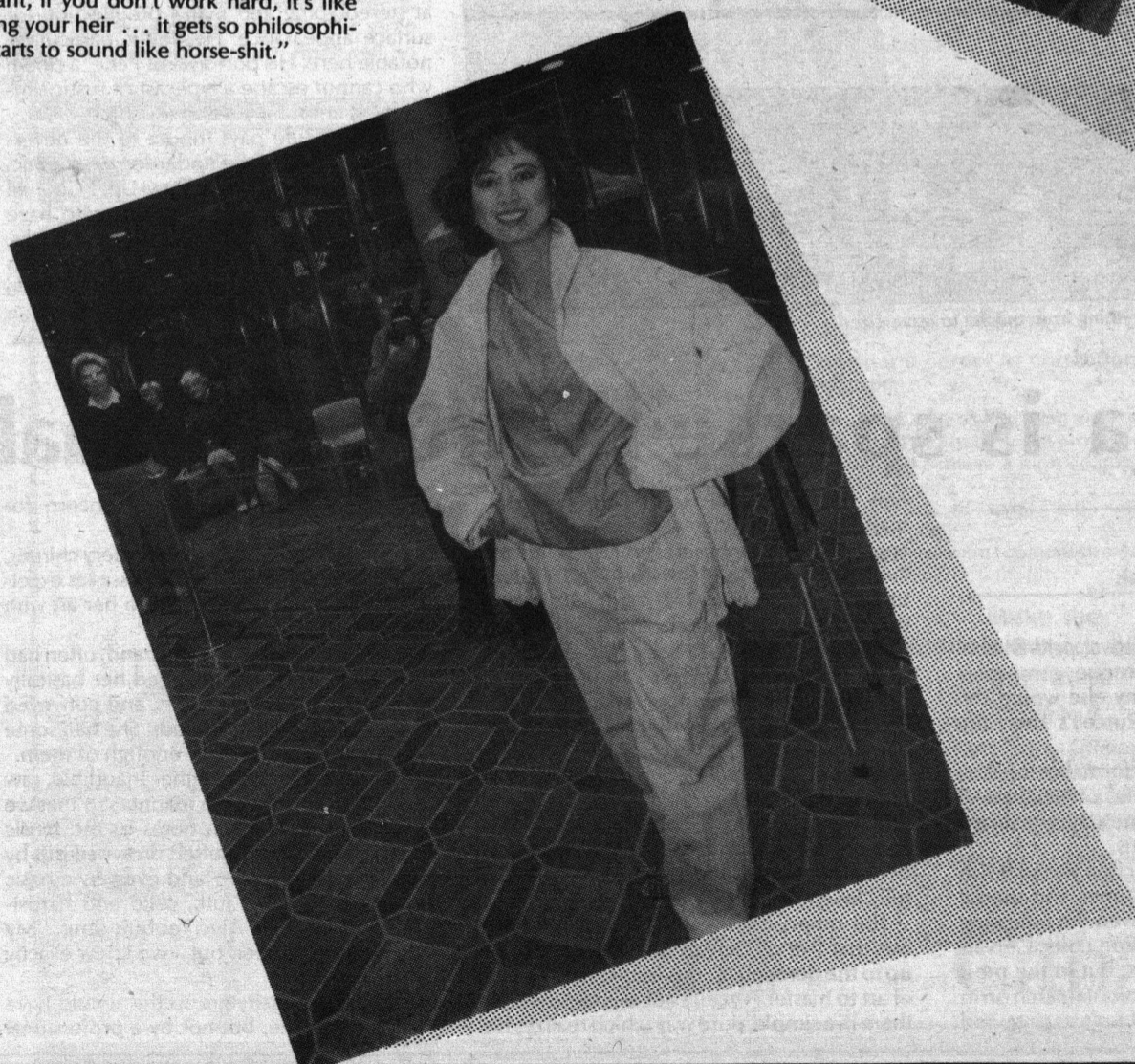
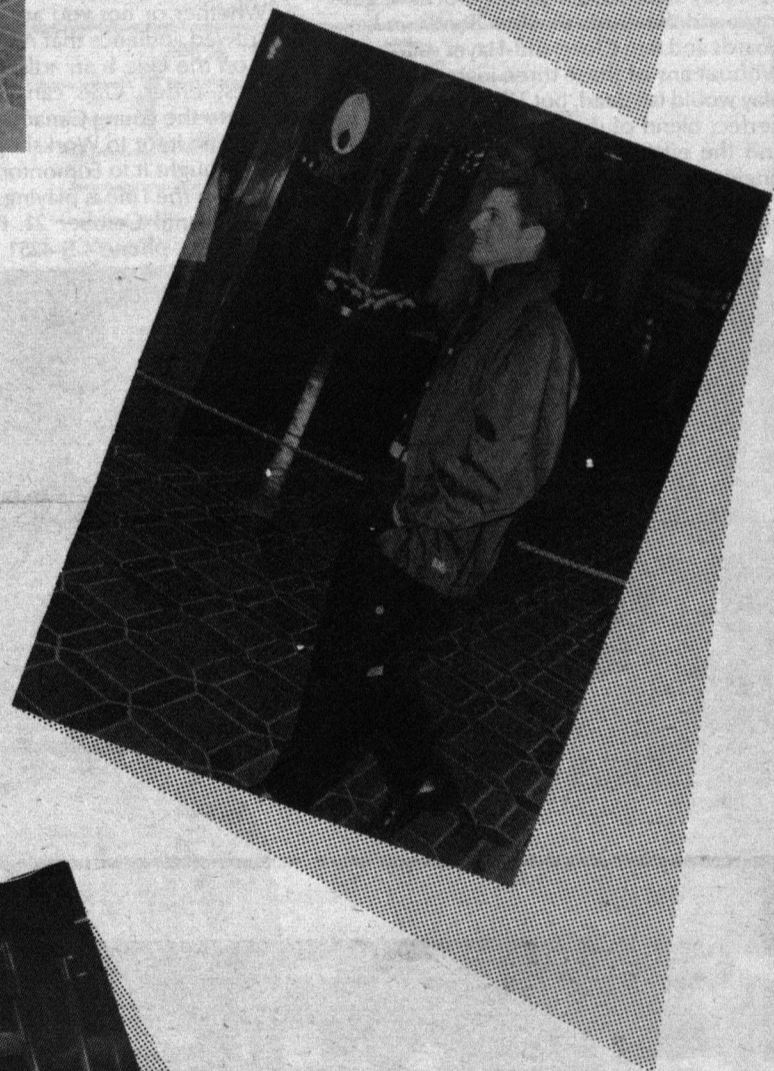
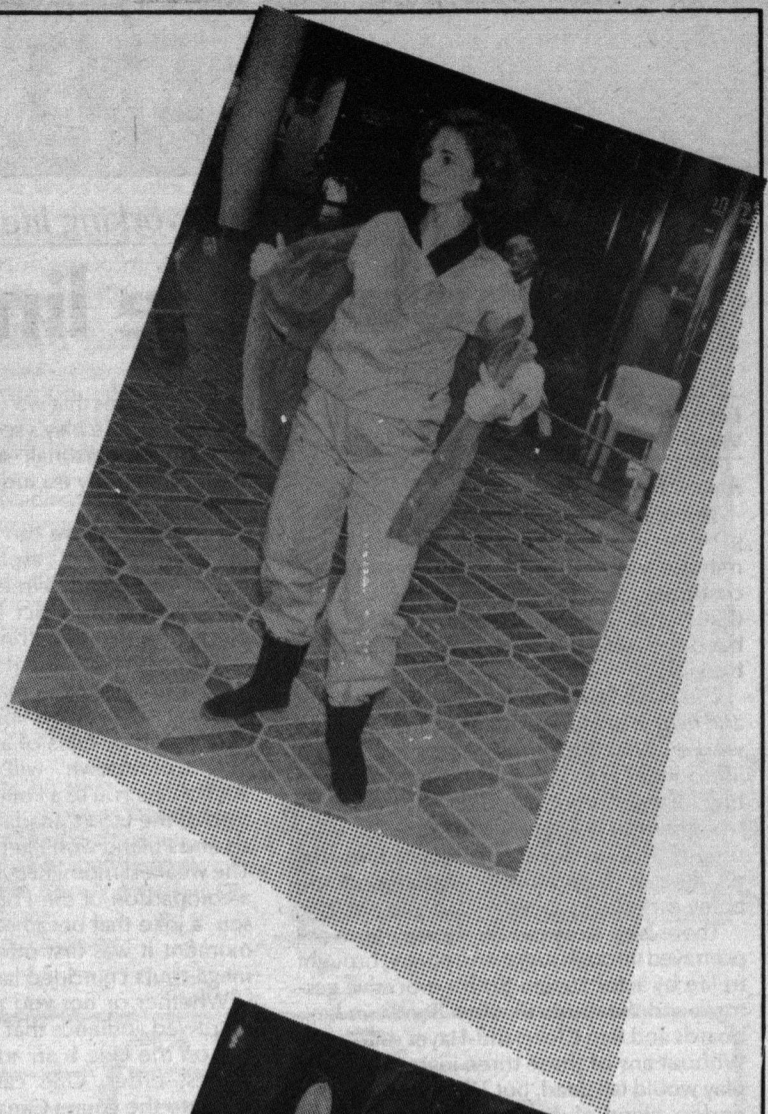


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Stephens also emphasizes the quality of the clothes. "We put a lot of effort on our clothes. They come with a 100 per cent no-questions-asked guarantee. We'll repair things that are three years old. If you still have your invoice, we'll even give you your money back." But Stephens says her customers are happy with the product. "We've had less than five per cent cash returns."

Although she is unpretentious after her spectacular success, she is not unaffected. "It's sobering to see the sewers come in," she says of her herring factory manufacturing house. "There's a hundred people dependent on you to feed their kids, pay their mortgages. It's scary sometimes, when it seems they think you have all the answers."

Attributing almost all of her success to "luck", Stephens is a fatalist.

"There's only so far you can go. You go broke, so what, you go broke," she says. "Dad always said the only things you regret are the things you didn't do. Hard work is so important, if you don't work hard, it's like deserting your heir . . . it gets so philosophical, it starts to sound like horse-shit."

Stephens says they have started to sew the buttons on the "men's" side of the unisex-cut clothes.

Because the business was so successful during the depths of the economic recession, the financial story often takes the limelight from the actual clothing line, but Stephens does not mind.

"I think it's fine," she says. "I had absolutely no training in business. I had a lot of help from a lot of people," she says. "When I meet a good business person, I will sit and pick their brains to learn more about business. It cuts through a lot of the bullshit you probably have to learn in business school."

The basis of the company's success is its clothes, 100 per cent cotton, hand-made, now designed by David MacDonald, which reflect the "people intensive" operation of the company.

"They're low-tech," Stephens says. "They're so plain you can adapt them to any trend that comes along."

Her optimistic outlook on life is expressed in the bright colours she uses. "They make people feel good. They can forget about their problems for a while."

She says the basic look of the line has not changed since she started 5½ years ago. "I'd

Words: Suzette C. Chan

Pictures: Bill Inglee, at ManuLife Place