

Triumphant designer, Tory Burch, chats with Flair

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Tory Burch in India.



Tory Burch (middle, black dress) takes a bow with models in September at the end of her Spring 2010 show during New York City's Fashion Week.

In just five years, Valley Forge-bred, Agnes Irwin- and Penn-educated Tory Burch, 43, has proven that's she a whole lot more than a pretty face fronting a hot-selling lifestyle label. A shrewd businesswoman with a keen grasp of the marketplace, she's involved in every facet of the design empire over which she presides. ("Empire" isn't a stretch when you consider how many upscale department stores and boutiques around the world carry the ever-exploding Tory Burch line. Locally, Tory Burch is sold at Neiman Marcus and Skirt while Nordstrom carries only her shoes.)

On Nov. 16 Tory will return to the Main Line as this year's guest designer at InFashion, a luncheon/fashion show benefit for the Wellness Community of Philadelphia.

She's in good company. InFashion designers have included established couturiers like Carolina Herrera and up-and-comers like Zac Posen.

A familiar face to readers of the New York City society pages, she belongs in neither designer category: she's no longer a fashion ingénue but hasn't reached the rarified air of a Lauren, an Armani or an Oscar ... yet. What sets her apart is that Tory Burch personifies a look and lifestyle to which so many aspire. It's almost as if women want to dress like her because, deep down, they want to be her. A single mother of three boys, she prompts fascination, defies definition and outpaces expectation at every turn. I called her at

her Manhattan office last week.

We first met you when you showed your very first collection at a Peter's Place Girls Night Out. To say you've come a long way in four-and-half years is an understatement. Did you expect this kind of success?

It's crazy. I never anticipated where we would be. I don't think I'll ever be jaded seeing people wearing my clothing. I'm always completely flattered.

With high-end labels suffering in this economy, you must be counting your blessings that you had the foresight to go the "affordable luxury" route?

I'm not sure I ever would have gone with a designer price point because I felt that that market was saturated. What I thought was, "What would make us stand out?" So yes, I couldn't be happier. Hopefully we'll always continue at this price point – regardless of the state of the economy. It happens to be working to our advantage right now. I think it's important to give women an alternative of beautifully designed, well-made clothes that are accessibly priced.

My 18-year-old daughter saved her hard-earned money to buy your \$200 Reva flats last year.

It's so funny. I keep meeting young and younger girls. I'm amazed by it really. I think definitely there is a "Gossip Girls" phenomenon happening and we are very present on that show I'm not sure if your daughter watches it?

She never misses it.

It's really had an effect on the younger girl wearing our clothing. She references it, she brings tear sheets in of Blake Lively wearing our clothing or Leighton Meester ... The fact that it is well priced also explains it, along with the fact that we offer a lot of different colors and styles. I think your 18-year-old is wearing it!

Neiman's tells me women of all ages are buying Tory Burch.

What I find really interesting is how customers are growing on both ends: besides our core customer, we have a much younger customer and an older customer as well. It's great that we're really able to dress all ages of women and they obviously put it together very differently. Whenever I see an older woman in my clothes, I think they look chic and elegant.

Why do your clothes play so well here on Main Line? Both Neiman's and Skirt say you're among their top brands. Is because they're classic but also colorful? Is it due, in part, to the fact that you're from here and you "get" us?

I love hearing that, first of all. Listen, I think it's great I'm from there. I'm so proud I'm from Philadelphia; I go back any chance I can. But I think that while Philadelphia women definitely relate to the classic side of our collections, they like its eclectic edge. They don't want to just wear classic, traditional clothing. They're too savvy and much more interested in fashion.

It's almost like girls growing up on the Main Line wore a uniform – and not just to school. In my day it was cable knit sweaters, sand-colored corduroys and Papagallo. What was your "uniform"?

Growing up in Valley Forge, I was into sports and riding horses and playing tennis. I was never into fashion. I don't think I paid attention to magazines. But I was definitely interested in sportswear. I wore L.L. Bean or The Gap or whatever it was, and that's still interesting to me. (On weekends when I get out of the city, I still wear sportswear a lot.) Other than that, dressing was a lot about Benetton, Ann Taylor and Laura Ashley, which is kind of funny in retrospect.

Someone once said that the chicest women in the carpool line are wearing Tory Burch.

We design for women who are incredibly busy and who want to look chic and elegant but don't have a lot of time to put into the thought process of it all. If we can design easy, no-brainer clothes that they can experiment with, I'll be thrilled.

How often do you get back to the Main Line?

A fair amount. I still have a house in Haverford. We have all our first cousins there and my mother and my brother, so my boys and I spend a lot of time in Philadelphia. Any time I don't have a commitment, I'll go down for a weekend.

What are your favorite Main Line haunts?

I love Terrain [Glen Mills], which I went to recently. I thought it was a great concept. I was really impressed. I love visiting the Barnes collection or the Philadelphia Museum of Art when I have time. I was an art history major. The Barnes is a spectacular way to see that art. It's really exciting to go there. And I love Carlino's Market in Ardmore. I always take my kids there. And there's Bluefin, a Japanese restaurant [Plymouth Meeting], which is excellent for sushi. I always like shopping at Anthropologie – they have a great mix. I love their home collection; I buy a lot of plates and glasses there. For the price point, I think what they're doing is amazing.

What is your fondest memory growing up here?

My childhood was kind of idyllic – it couldn't have been better. It was all about being with family, playing sports and spending a lot of time outdoors. I think that's a great thing to be able to do as a child.

How has Main Line fashion sensibility changed since you moved to New York?

Their style has evolved, like my own. The Main Line women that I know are really stylish. I love to see the way they put things together in a unique way. It's not always a safe way. They definitely are experimental with the way they dress and I admire that.

The King of Prussia mall has confirmed that you're "in serious discussions" to open a Tory Burch boutique there but a lease has not been signed.

I spent a lot of time at the King of Prussia mall growing up and I definitely hope that you're right and we will be there one day. There are no definitive plans yet.

You have boutiques all over the place but you still don't have one near your hometown. Why is that?

Anywhere we go is really about location. It's about being patient and waiting for the right spot. We definitely have specific places we see ourselves going to and will go at some point, but we want to do it in the right way.

Why did you steer the Tory Burch Foundation to micro-financing for American women entrepreneurs?

Did you know that it's harder for women to get loans in the States than it is in India? When you think of micro-financing, you think of a third world country, but here, in my opinion, we have an enormous need to help people and help jumpstart our economy. Women are such an important part of our economy and they're being the hardest hit right now. I've met many entrepreneurs that have the passion, and I know that they could be successful if they had that seed money and if they had that mentorship. I will teach my children and my company to get involved in giving back. We've partnered with Accion USA to help us screen entrepreneurs and get a handle on how we're going to do this. Eventually we'll set up a mentorship program.

How did you get involved with the Wellness Community's fundraiser?

Through my sister-in-law, Patty Isen, [the luncheon's co-chair.] Anything that helps people living with cancer and their families is very important to me personally. I'm on the board of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, and I've spent a lot of time working with cancer survivors.

Has cancer touched your family?

My father had lung cancer and he passed away [three years ago] from one of its complications.

You are known to keep a close watch on your image and how your clothes are displayed. Local cancer survivors will be modeling your clothes at the InFashion luncheon. Doesn't that mean you lose a little control?

I couldn't be happier about having cancer survivors model. I am inspired by these powerful, incredible women. I can't wait to see the way they look in our clothing.

I know a few of them including Lauren Hart and LuAnn Cahn, and I'm sure they'll rock the place.

I'm sure. I see it all the time. I'm so impressed that they're able to do it, that all these women are feeling well and that they will do it.

You appear to both have it all and have it all together. How do you juggle raising three boys with your work and social life?

I have a great team from a work standpoint. I would never be able to do it without them. Four of the original five – we worked out of my apartment for two years – are still with me. As far as juggling family and work, I think it's very difficult. It's something I struggle to do well every day. My kids come dead first, so anything that they need, I'm there for. Everything will fall into place after that. It's definitely a balancing act and it's not always easy. At the end of the day, I'm not someone who gets caught up in the minutiae of things. I think it's important to be grateful for what you have – to be appreciative and happy – and at the same time to really live while we can. And to spend a lot of time with family.

How quickly are you able to pull yourself together the morning?

Every morning I take my boys to school at 8. I get ready in two minutes. I'm not a big maintenance person. I literally walk out with a wet head. I try to exercise in the morning but it's getting harder and harder.

Low-maintenance but you look pretty swell in photographs...

Maybe with a little hair and make-up on [laughs] but most of the time that's not the case.

What's next for your company? □

We're opening our first international store in Japan next month. I'm going there; my kids are going to meet me in Asia for Christmas. And we're opening more stores in the States. By the end of next year we'll have about 38 stores.

Are you expanding your lines?

We launched eyewear today. It's really exciting because it's retailing for under \$200. Finding beautiful, well-made sunglasses for that price is hard, and I'm really pleased with the way they turned out. I always lose my sunglasses and it drives me crazy. At some point we're also going to be doing beauty and a fragrance.

Will we ever see Tory Burch for Target?

I love Target but because the price point on many of our pieces is not that different from theirs, I'm not sure that that will ever happen. On the other hand I'm always interested from a charity standpoint to get involved with different companies, so you never know.

GO FOR IT! With local cancer survivors as models, Tory Burch will personally present her holiday collection at the Nov. 16 InFashion luncheon at Gulph Mills Country Club. Proceeds benefit the Wellness Community of Philadelphia's support programs for cancer patients and their families. Call 215-393-9105 for reservations or visit [www. twcp.org](http://www.twcp.org). Tickets are \$150.