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Tight Times, Tiny Niche: Opening a Store Anyway

By Diane Cardwell
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For Jeff Williams and his wife, Masayo Fukuda-Williams, the day often begins like this: After driving to the East Village around noon from their home in Valley Stream, on Long Island, one sits in the car for half an hour until, under alternate-side rules, it is legal to park. The other unlocks their new clothing store, Tokyo Rebel, to get ready for the 12:30 p.m. opening.

Inside the store on Monday was Mr. Williams, who by noon had mopped the floor and was sweeping the last bits of detritus onto the sidewalk. He nervously eyed a noisy Con Edison truck that had taken up residence in front of the narrow storefront at 170 Avenue B, between 10th and 11th Streets.

It is hard enough starting a business in the grip of a recession — swimming against the tide of shuttered storefronts, record unemployment and anemic retail sales — much less a specialty shop devoted to the cultish Japanese street fashion known as Lolita, inspired by Victorian and Rococo styles.

Opening in October, the couple settled for this stretch of the avenue, dotted more with restaurants and bars than boutiques, after finding the rents too high on St. Marks Place, where an established cluster of punk and Japanese retailers might feed their store. They have kept their other jobs — she as a full-time nurse and student, he as a Web producer — and hired no employees as they wait for business to pick up and for a loan brokered by the city's Department of Small Business Services to come through.

As Mr. Williams, 37, put it, he and his wife, 38, had reached an age where they realized that if they were ever going to own a business — something he has wanted for many years — they would simply have to make the leap, bad economy or not.

"It is definitely scary — we don't know what's going to happen," Mr. Williams said, after pulling merchandise sold on their Web site off the racks to pack and ship from home later that night. "We're trying as hard as we can, because we know it's really difficult right now.

"There's never a day off — I'm sure everyone says that, but it doesn't even seem like there's an hour off. You know, 2 in the morning on Sunday night I'm still working on the Web site."

So for this, their first holiday season selling the corseted dresses, tulle petticoats, over-the-knee socks and parasols they hope work as gifts, they have extended their hours, opening on Mondays, often a slow day in the neighborhood.

But now the Con Ed truck, occasionally belching fumes, was threatening to flood the store with smoke and drive away what few drop-ins might pass by. Mr. Williams took up his post at the front counter, standing over a laptop to answer e-mail messages that had arrived the night before, pausing to make the temperamental CD player work, occasionally eyeing the truck and shaking his head as the Britpop strains of Elastica finally filled the room.

"We have customers," Mr. Williams declared that evening, after a late-afternoon Web and e-mail announcement of a sudden 10 percent in-store discount brought a young woman shopping for her sister into the boutique. "We just need more of them."

Indeed, much of the couple's business — 30 to 40 percent — comes through the Web site, which they started in February to help build a following for the store.

Mr. Williams, who grew up in New Jersey and studied film at New York University, has worked in retail and in Web site production for years. Mrs. Fukuda-Williams grew up in Tokyo, and she would hang out with her friends in the Harajuku district, the street-level catwalk of Japanese style cults, where she first came across Lolita.

The style, which has evolved over decades, now has several subgenres, including the sugary Victoriana of the Sweet Lolita and the harder-edged dark garb of her cousin, the Gothic Lolita. Devotees of the style often plan meet-ups and other events, a circuit the store has begun to tap into using Twitter and Facebook. Some customers come to hang out — as a small group did on Monday afternoon — and maybe look at the Japanese Lolita magazines on display, as well as to shop.

Yes, there are challenges. The weakness of the dollar against the yen has sometimes made customers think the couple was overcharging, Mr. Williams said, so now he posts each day's exchange rate on a white board near the cash register.

Mrs. Fukuda-Williams has to juggle work and school by studying on the train and using her iPhone to place orders with the Japanese companies that supply the store. And the tasks seem endless. After closing Monday night, the store became an impromptu photo studio, as Mr. Williams brought out lights and a digital camera to shoot new inventory to post on the Web site.

Asked how long they can keep going like that, he said, "Not forever," adding that they hoped to hire a staff someday. "We planned that we might have to do this for a year, but hopefully it won't be that long."

The couple say they have been heartened by support from their customers, who tend to be young and arty. Some work in restaurants and bring them free food. Others have asked for the store's business cards to hand out to friends. They say customers want the store to succeed because it is one of few places they can find clothing from labels like Sex Pot Revenge, Angelic Pretty and Victorian Maiden.

The couple were just about to close up around 8 p.m. when Cliff Cage, 30, who works at VampireFreaks, a Gothic store on Avenue A, came by with a group of D.J. friends to say that the Williamses could place their fliers — once they make them — in his store.

Admiring a black coat trimmed in fur and pompoms, Jared Helfer, 26, a legal assistant, promised to bring his girlfriend back. "This is stuff she'd live on," he said.