

Rags to Riches

Founded as a T-shirt company in New Brunswick, Ecko Unlimited hit rock bottom before rising to become a major player in the fashion world.

By Bill Glovin
Photograph by Deborah Feingold

In an office in the heart of New York City's garment district, 31-year-old Marc Ecko peeks at his email while his twin sister, Marci Tapper, tells a story that he himself has told countless times before: "Our mother suspected that she might be carrying two babies because she felt kicking on both sides, but the doctor kept assuring her that what she was feeling was an echo," says Tapper (RC '94). "She didn't know until she was in the delivery room that she was about to have twins."

Marc, who was born a few minutes after Marci, was the first of many surprises that Norton and Margo Milecofsky would experience as a result of their decision to have another child. The parents are still trying to figure out from whom Marc, an internationally famous fashion designer, inherited his considerable artistic ability. They also never dreamt that their kids would one day go into business together, much less name their company Ecko for an obstetrician's faux pas. Marc legally changed his name from Milecofsky to Ecko in 1997.





“ We went through the schmucky phase, when we threw money at the business because we had made some headway, to the business-plan phase, where we had to prove on paper that we had something unique to offer the market. ”

Known for its bold hip-hop design, Marc Ecko Enterprises (www.ecko.com), has become one of the fastest growing labels in American fashion, a brand instantly recognized by young people from Newark to Newport Beach, California. The \$800 million enterprise promotes itself as a “lifestyle company,” but men’s, women’s, and kids’ clothes drive revenues. It promotes everything from watches, gloves, and headbands to video games, eyewear, and art supplies through its rhino logo, the name ECKO in oversized letters, and in a self-published, bimonthly street-culture magazine called *Complex*. The company received a much-publicized shot in the arm last year

when it signed a licensing agreement with 50 Cent, one of the hottest rappers in the music business.

The founders initially launched the company in 1993 from an off-campus apartment at 72 Lewis Street in New Brunswick. Marc, then a Rutgers pharmacy student, and Seth Gerszberg of Teaneck, a student at Yeshiva University in Manhattan, met through a mutual friend. Gerszberg, a young entrepreneur, was so taken with his friend’s artistic talent that he gambled \$5,000 of his own money on it.

The duo began by hawking T-shirts to stores such as Planet X and Sound Express in New Brunswick. Ecko had already attracted a following when Spike Lee and Chuck D began wearing his graffiti-inspired T-shirts. Gradually Ecko and Gerszberg expanded, first into warehouse space on Jersey Avenue in New Brunswick and then to offices and warehouse space in South River.

Today, the large, white South River building, named The Mindlabs, houses 65 designers and almost every rhinoceros artifact under the sun, including an enormous brass rhino sculpture. While Ecko and Tapper both maintain spacious offices there, most days are spent commuting from their Middlesex and Monmouth County homes to Manhattan.

Ecko and Tapper were raised in Lakewood, an especially diverse community, even by New Jersey standards. Blacks, Latinos, and Hasidic Jews make up such a significant portion of the population that the white siblings were in a minority in the town’s public schools. Ecko was fascinated by the town’s vibrant hip-hop culture. “I was the fat kid who couldn’t break dance or rap or dunk a basketball,” he says. “In school, graffiti was my layup. It was something I was good at, and other kids related to it.”

When the twins were six months old, Grandma Ann moved in with the family to help out. Shari Marcus (RC’88), an older sister who works part time in Ecko’s purchasing department, credits her grandmother with supplying Marc with his first crayons and paper. While Ecko loved to draw, Tapper was more likely to be organizing her Barbies, roles analogous to the ones they’ve taken in their company. Says their father, Norton (PHARM’61): “You could see from Marc’s drawings from elementary school that he was a natural; the kid was doing remarkable stuff. Marci was bright and a hard worker. When she said something was going to get done, you could bank on it.”

After Marc got an airbrush as a Bar Mitzvah gift, the garage became his sanctuary. He also took it on the road to paint everything from cars to fingernails to an occasional masterpiece on the back of the local supermarket. Marcus relates that she once wore a jacket with Marc’s airbrushed image of Michael Bivins



*ecko unltd.
DENIM FOUNDRY

®1972

Ecko Unlimited founder Marc Ecko incorporates his ubiquitous rhino logo and the number "72" into his clothing designs and labels, the latter a tip of the hat to the year he and his twin sister, Marci Tapper, the company's executive vice president, were born.

to a Bell Biv Devoe concert. Bivins noticed the jacket, and Marcus handed it to him. "[He] invited me and my friend to a party at their hotel after the show," says Marcus. "They even asked to meet Marc."

When it came time for college, Ecko had his sights set firmly on Rutgers College of Pharmacy while Tapper considered the University of Delaware. "Many of my friends were saying that it was better to go out-of-state, but my heart wasn't in leaving," says Tapper, who ultimately decided on Rutgers. "I liked the idea that New Brunswick was within easy driving distance." They also were both familiar with Rutgers since both their father and older sister were graduates and the twins had visited the campus as teenagers.

As first-year students, Tapper lived in Clothier Hall and Ecko in Hardenbergh Hall. Ecko loved everything about college—except the demanding, five-year pharmacy curriculum. "To this day, I'm not sure why I picked pharmacy to study," he says. "My dad left pharmacy to go into real estate, and he never pushed me. It was probably the influence of my high school guidance counselor, who didn't feel that art was a practical career choice."

Thinking he might drop out in his junior year and try designing T-shirts full time, Ecko made an appointment with pharmacy dean John Colaizzi to help him sort things out. "Marc was a member of Alpha Zeta Omega, one of our professional fraternities, and we asked him to develop a poster to help with our centennial celebration," says Colaizzi. "His poster demonstrated considerable talent, and it was evident that his interest and ability lay in the creative arts, even though he clearly had the ability to finish the program. I didn't want him to one day look back and say, 'what if?' I suggested that he trust his instincts."

The advice not only changed Ecko's life but Tapper's as well. With his parents' blessing, Ecko dropped out and temporarily left behind his girlfriend, Allison Rojas (DC'94), now his wife, to backpack through Hong Kong and study the clothing industry. When he returned, he hooked up with Gerszberg, and soon the partners desperately needed help. Tapper, who had completed her degree in sociology and was considering a career as a teacher, came to the rescue. "I couldn't say no to Marc, even though I knew that it was going to be a struggle. And it was. We made every mistake you could make," she says. Adds Ecko, with a grin, "We made the same mistakes twice, but never three times."

Looking back, Ecko believes Rutgers played a significant role in shaping his design sensibility. "Rutgers reflected what you find in New Jersey: an innate hustle

(continued on page 42)



A former student in the Rutgers College of Pharmacy, Ecko created a poster (above) celebrating the school's centennial in 1992. Shortly after, he left school to design clothing, which today includes the G Unit brand, launched in 2003 with rapper 50 Cent, and another specifically for babies and toddlers.

Rags to Riches

continued from page 19

and hustle, grittiness and earthiness, diversity, a lack of pretentiousness—all big influences,” he says.

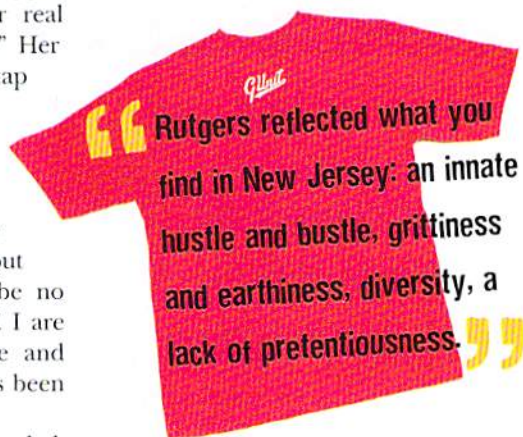
Dressed in a long-sleeved black blouse and jeans, executive vice president Tapper teases that her real title is “Queen.” Her brother, sporting a baseball cap worn in reverse that makes him look more mailroom clerk than design mogul, laughs at his sister’s quip. “People tend to give me more credit because the company is in my name, but without Marci and Seth, there would be no company,” says Ecco. “Seth and I are visionaries; Marci gets it done and makes sure we get it done. She’s been an incredible force.”

The trio faced incredible challenges: lawsuits, debt, trademark issues, and accounting problems. But they say the struggle has made them strong and appreciative. “We went through the schmucky phase, when we threw money at the business because we had made some headway, to the business-plan phase, where we had to prove on paper that we had something unique to offer the market,” says Ecco. Their rock bottom moment came in 1997 when they were \$6 million in debt and larger competitors were strategizing to eliminate them. “Marci and I were thinking maybe this wasn’t going to work, but Seth wouldn’t hear of it,” says Ecco.

To the rescue came Scope Imports in Houston, which provided new capital, and allowed the founders to focus on their strengths: design and marketing. Finding the right visual hook to set the company apart from its competitors was also key. One day Ecco noticed some old driftwood rhino figurines on a shelf at home and began tinkering with the image of a rhino on the computer. “Rhinos have a mythological sensibility; they’re herbivores but still rugged and fierce,” says Ecco. “When a rhino is cornered, it shimmies side to side because it can’t walk backward. It’s not only a

survivor, but also always moving forward. Plus, they’re cool.”

A logo featuring the rhino soon began appearing on Ecco products. “People see the logo and instantly know it is us,” he says. “At the same time, hip-hop was becoming more mainstream, so it was also a case of being in the right



place at the right time.” Suddenly, the company that had once used basketball positions instead of titles on its business cards and card tables for its meetings was finding floor space in Macy’s and Target.

Forging connections to pop culture is crucial in the \$2 billion hip-hop fashion industry. This was evident as Ecco models strutted to reggae, rap, a Pink Floyd hip-hop mix, and the Monday Night Football theme during “Dreamnasium,” the title of the company’s runway show at last fall’s Fashion Week in Manhattan.

Patches, funky hats, a lively mix of fabrics, shirts that were left untucked and unbuttoned, and pants with one leg rolled up and another left down gave many of the models a *Pirates of the Caribbean* look. Some of the models showed off sleek, dressier outfits, part of a new Ecco strategy to reach older consumers.

Ecco, the company’s CEO and creative force, calls style “a never-ending journey. Fashion is not something that can be purchased. It changes with age,

experiences, travel, living,” he says. He believes that five years from now, consumers won’t associate the Ecco brand primarily with clothes. Garments just happen to be the vehicle that will allow them to expand into uncharted territory: consumer electronics, publishing, and products for extreme sports. The next step is their own retail stores. “We’ve already opened up 20 outlet stores; in five years we hope to have 100 stores across the country.”

Ecco and Tapper sometimes pinch themselves because they can’t believe their good fortune, both creative and financial. Gerszberg—the president and chief operating officer responsible for strategic planning and development—has helped keep them grounded. Says Ecco, “When we finally turned the corner in 1999, Seth said, ‘I want to take our first \$100,000 in profit and donate it to people who don’t have hope.’ I said, ‘Seth, we’re only 27, can I own a house first or take a regular salary?’ But he convinced us to donate that money, and he was right.”

So the first \$100,000 in profit went to the Tikva orphanage in Odessa, Ukraine. The partners have subsequently fallen in love with the place and have convinced the country’s social service agency to allow them to run it. So far they’ve funded a building expansion and last summer they sponsored a golf tournament that raised a considerable sum for the orphanage. “Tikva is only a starting point,” says Tapper. “There are many other places in the world where we can have an impact.”

Norton, at times a walking billboard for Ecco apparel, says one perk of having his kids own a company is that “other kids size me up, a 65-year-old, and say, ‘Look at the cool dude!’” He adds, “I couldn’t be more pleased. With all my kids’ success, they haven’t forgotten where they came from. For me, the fact that they’re still down-to-earth and not the least bit spoiled is the beautiful part.”

Bill Glovin, known for his Iverson XI sneakers, is senior editor at RUTGERS MAGAZINE.