

POWER PROFILE

Nina McLemore

Almost overnight, she's become a leading designer for women who dress for success

By Whitney Blake
Examiner Staff Writer

Attending a Washington trunk show of fashion designer Nina McLemore is not like stepping into Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. Instead of bright lights, shiny floors and overzealous salespeople, McLemore's Georgetown row house, which doubles as her showroom, is like taking a brief respite from a hectic day.

The parlor and the adjoining rooms have high ceilings, exposed beams, crisp white transoms and a tasteful European decor mixed with Oriental accents. Racks of colorful clothes surround the parlor, with classic and exotic jewelry displays sprinkled about the furnishings.

A handful of women sit and chat about the news and gossip of the day, like old friends. A few customers walk in and out, admiring clothes, trying them on and hearing opinions from everyone else.

This warm atmosphere seems simple, almost as if created spontaneously. But it's actually part of a carefully crafted business model designed to find a profitable niche in the crowded and competitive world of fashion.

The brain behind the operation is McLemore, 62, who founded her eponymous company in 2003. She saw an opening in the fashion market for middle-aged women in positions of influence. Almost overnight, she became a leading designer for women who dress for success — and who achieve it.

"I'm very angry at the fashion industry," she said. The industry has "no respect for accomplished women," viewing them as "sex objects, not smart and capable."

Her line, mainly "jacket driven," also includes pants and blouses for business, casual and evening attire. She targets businesswomen with high net worth, female politicians — most notably Sen. Hillary Clinton — and what McLemore calls "community women" who are involved in philanthropy or who have husbands



McLemore, who has dressed the likes of Sen. Hillary Clinton, founded her company in 2003 after eyeing an opportunity to fill a vacuum in the fashion field: high-end clothes for middle-aged women in positions of power. — Greg Whitesell/Examiner

in powerful positions. And she has played host to events for the congressional wives club.

McLemore has a keen sense of her customers' tastes. Women in law, government and business "dress more understatedly and conservatively" compared with women in New York. At the same time, Washington women have an international flair and often pick textiles and colors from, say, Southeast Asia and Kenya.

New York likes to think D.C. "has no sense of style," a perception McLemore dismissed. "Washington has become more diverse in business," she said, and an influx of

young professional women has added dash and sophistication.

Clinton prefers longer jackets, and her signature colors include blue and coral, which McLemore said brings out the highlights in her hair. The two were introduced when Clinton was first lady.

McLemore's clothes come in five fits to accommodate all body shapes, and she designs them herself with natural fabrics primarily made in America. She recommends bold, vibrant colors for women who often appear in public or on television. McLemore picks versatile styles that can be worn anywhere, and she uses wrinkle-free materials to allow for easy traveling.

She sells her line in only about 30 stores in the United States. She has a main showroom in New York, but the heart of the business is trunk shows, about 300 a year in homes and boutiques.

Her business model has "so much potential," with low overhead and a focus on personal attention, said Jill duPont, who owns a boutique in Greenwich, Conn., that just started carrying McLemore's line.

"She's a renegade" who doesn't "follow the norm or the old-school rules," and she's "got the brains and talent to pull it off," said Elizabeth Brooks, director of a small company that does market research.

For McLemore, designing clothes

is a happy combination of creativity and capitalism. She said she loves "making the perfect picture," and "I love good numbers."

The employees of the company are sales representatives who set their own hours and manage their own customer base. McLemore said her goal is to create "economic independence" for women who love fashion and want to earn extra income. She has built her company into a \$6.1 million business, making it the 35th-fastest-growing retail company, according to rankings published by Inc. magazine. She projects revenues of \$10 million for 2007.

McLemore started her company almost by accident. She had planned to give up her career after she and Don Baker, a Washington lawyer, decided to get married. But when she went shopping with friends, she realized that many of the women couldn't find clothes that suited them. That insight inspired her clothing line, which she unveiled just months before her marriage.

McLemore was no stranger to the fashion world, having founded Liz Claiborne Accessories in 1980. By the time she left in early 1993, the business was generating \$165 million in revenue and about \$40 million in pretax profits. She sharpened her business skills with a master's degree in business administration

NINA McLEMORE'S TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- 1 Use your clothing and appearance to create the image you want to achieve.
- 2 Know the numbers. Get an MBA in finance, not marketing.
- 3 Build your network and your reputation.
- 4 Deflect tension with humor.
- 5 Take calculated risks. Live on the edge!

from Columbia University, earning it at age 50; her leadership of Regent Capital Partners, a private equity investment firm she founded after graduating from Columbia; and her involvement in several nonprofit groups for female business leaders.

Growing up in Hazelhurst, Miss., in the 1960s, McLemore was surrounded by entrepreneurial women. One grandmother sewed clothes, and another grandmother ran the dairy side of a farm. Her mother was in charge of the family shop, which sold flowers and gifts. McLemore adopted the "paradigm that women were active economic contributors."

She studied French and economics at Louisiana State University and after graduating went to work for a clothing buyer. She eventually became the head of the import division at May Department Stores, at 29, which took her to Asia, South America and Europe.

But McLemore remains a Southerner at heart. "She has a great sense of place and family, and she's never lost that," said her uncle, Moran Pope.

McLemore devotes time to organizations that encourage aspiring young female entrepreneurs, such as the Center for Women's Business Research, the Committee of 200, the Women Presidents' Organization and the International Women's Forum. She displays her clothes at many seminars hosted by these groups and donates a percentage of the proceeds to the cause.

"Nina is very generous, she walks her talk and gives money to women starting companies," said Susan Stautberg, a friend and fellow entrepreneur of a New York consulting firm.

In the short term, McLemore is determined to keep expanding her business and doing what she loves. The future is an open book, though, and her next venture is anyone's guess. Her philosophy? "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space."

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BIO FILE | NINA McLEMORE

Born: 1945 **Hometown:** Hazlehurst, Miss.

Education: B.A. in economics and French from Louisiana State University, 1967; MBA in finance from Columbia University Graduate School of Business, 1995.

Family: Husband Don Baker, senior partner, Baker and Miller, international and antitrust law in Washington.

Key jobs: Co-founder, Regent Capital Partners, 1995-2002; founder and president, Liz Claiborne Accessories, 1980-1993; vice president, GMM May Department Stores International, 1974-1980.

Biggest influence: Her mother, Margaret Pope McLemore.

Favorite book: "Pioneer Women" by Joanna Stratton.

Quote to live by: "You can get through anything if you breathe very deeply and just keep putting one foot in front of the other." — Nina McLemore after climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro in 1997.