

## Fish-ing for fashion:

# Clothing line brightens closets

By Laura Kenyon

Editor

With four parrots, palm tree wallpaper and framed beach scenes throughout her Marvin Ridge home, Debbie Seaman is not trying to hide her love of the tropics. In fact, she is draping herself in it.

"There I was, floating over the Great Barrier Reef," the former journalist described a 1992 visit to Australia, "and no sooner had my snorkeling mask hit (the water) than I looked and I just said 'Oh my God, I want to wear these fish.'"

Two children, 17 years and one career change later, Seaman is doing just that.

The 12-year New Canaan resident recently launched Barrier Reef Designs, a silk clothing line inspired by the graphics and colors of individual species of tropical fish.

Having seen prints based on leopard, zebra, boa and python hit the runway over the years, she said, "I like animal prints as much as anyone but figured it was time for something new."

Flipping through photographs taken by underwater photographer Roger Steene, Seaman's excitement was palpable during a recent meeting with the *Advertiser*.

"Isn't that incredible?" she asked while pointing to a neon sea slug. "I mean they are so beautiful just the way nature has painted these

things."

"Oh, and here's the one I'm wearing," she said, holding up a page showing the blue and green Fivestripe Wrasse, sporting her favorite color combination.

With no experience in design, a head bubbling with ideas and dwindling freelance jobs due to the economy, Seaman pulled out her list of contacts and began preparing for her "second act" about a year ago.

Armed with scissors and a scanner, the mother of two NCHS freshmen started simple by pasting Xeroxed fish photos in the shapes of dresses to poster board.

Until then, she said, the idea was difficult for those she approached to visualize.

"The idea was not to have pictures of the fish on my fabrics," she said, "but to proceed as if the fish skins themselves were projected onto silk."

Eventually, she got in touch with Charles Yip, a local resident who works with Lanerax, which deals with a factory in China.

"Charles looked at these drawings and I could see that he really had a twinkle in his eye," she said. "And I could see that he really liked the idea, and that's the thing. If you can get a factory to be willing to give small runs of fabric to get you started in the hopes that you're going to grow, that's the ideal situation."

Seaman's first run, which arrived in March, includes halter gowns,

one-shoulder tops, kimonos and long scarves/shawls. The scarves are made with fabrics to match the halter gowns and one-shoulder tops.

"I didn't even know it was going to be in style," she said about the decision to make a single-strap top. "It just says to me sort of 'Sheena, queen of the jungle,' exotic. And I think that it's a great look."

She chose silk because "it just holds color better than everything else" and because it was more environmentally friendly than rayon — something Seaman said was important to her.

Keeping with this theme, she said a percentage of the profits from Barrier Reef Designs will be donated to the Reef Check Foundation, which works to protect and rehabilitate ocean reefs worldwide.

"I've always loved fish, and I've always loved anything to do with tropics," she said. "I suppose my spiritual persona is somewhere in the sun with palm trees and the azure waters."

Having lived in California (which introduced her to "the second-hand Hawaiian shirt look") and Australia (where she "fell madly in love" with her husband), and traveled extensively to the Caribbean, Seaman's path is scattered with bits and pieces of the tropical lifestyle.

Her love of bright colors stretches back to her youth in Locust Bay, N.Y., when she recalls donning day-glow in the late '60s.

"I think everybody can light up



New Canaan resident Debbie Seaman, pictured with her Catalina McCaw, Gauguin, recently launched Barrier Reef Design, a clothing line inspired by the patterns and colors of tropical fish. (Photo by Laura Kenyon)

when they're wearing bright colors," she said.

Adding to the lure of her designs — and the potential for cocktail chatter, she said — the tag on each item sports a picture of the fish it is mimicking. "So that the customer will know what fish she is 'wearing.'"

Still "figuring out who my customer is," Seaman is in the process of choosing four more fabrics and styles for the coming resort season in November.

"It's good because I figure it goes

year-round because people are either going on vacation or it's summer," she said about the market. "I mean there are a couple of gaps in there, but I can sell it in the islands or in Florida."

The line is currently available at The Beach Corner in New Canaan, the Snappy Gator in Wilton and Fairfield, Out of the Box in Fairfield, several stores in Florida and online at [barrierreefdesigns.com](http://barrierreefdesigns.com).