New in Town

PROFILING EXCITING NEW BUSINESSES IN THE BOROUGH

INTRODUCING...

DRK•MTTR

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Courtney McGee doesn't want you to be afraid of the dark—at least from a fashion perspective. Since opening DRK MTTR, her shop at 128 E. Gay Street, in April, she's turned curiosity seekers (a store that only sells black clothing and accessories??) into repeat customers. Planning to be a retailer when she grew up may not have been the goal, but she has stuck the landing.

"Fashion has always been a huge part of my life starting from a very young age, but no, I haven't always wanted to do retail," Courtney recalled. "I was drawn to a unique and adventurous aesthetic as far back as I can remember. My mother told me that whenever I got a new pair of shoes, I'd have to sleep with them next to my pillow." Soon after joining the retail workforce in her twenties and gaining some experience, she also knew that her creativity was being restricted. "I realized I needed to be in a creative field in order to thrive and feel fulfilled and felt that working for myself someday is where I ultimately wanted to land."

Before opening DRK MTTR, Courtney's focus was on raising her children while obtaining a degree in fashion merchandising from the University of Delaware. "I definitely had a vision for quite

a long time, but I didn't know what to do with it. I ended up stockpiling amazing pieces for my personal collection and eventually realized that there was a great opportunity to share that with the community. The kind of aesthetic you see in DRK MTTR reflects how I live my life, so it was a very organic development to open it up to others and see how they react."

The result is a gallery-like space, the white walls offsetting the racks of all-black clothing—and one that looks professionally designed. "Interior design has also been a passion for me, so I was excited to be able to design the layout of the shop myself," Courtney said. "I'm drawn to sleek, modern design elements and was able to incorporate some of that with complementary elements, from the playlist to the smells that drift through the space. I was incredibly lucky to have found it; coincidentally it was a gallery before I moved in, so the bones were spot on." She gives a shout out to "my terrific brother-in-law, Aaron, who built and installed the custom clothing racks for me."

As for what's on those racks, while it is all black, the similarities end there. The merchandise is a curated mix of vintage and new, designer and everyday wear. "[That was] definitely deliberate," Courtney said. "One of my main objectives is to welcome everyone and make sure they feel genuinely included here when they walk through the door—whether that be through style, price, gender inclusivity, or sizing. I want everyone to feel like they can find something that speaks to them and them alone."

That includes women of a certain age, held by a societal norm to avoid black as they get older, as it's too harsh for paler, more mature skin. Courtney never got that memo. "I don't recall ever hearing that advice—and I disagree! I don't believe age should be a barrier to anything someone wants to do in their life. In fact, black is a powerful color for women in general, including those 'of a certain age.' Throughout history, color has played a big part in society's interpretation of an individual's self-presentation."



That mindset extends past gender norms as well. Although DRK MTTR began with women's clothing, Coutney says "I'd always intended to stock garments that occupy all areas of the gender spectrum, so individuals exploring the shop can locate themselves wherever they feel comfortable. But it happened earlier than anticipated due to the numerous requests from my amazing customers. I'm proud to offer pieces that speak to everyone."

Whatever you'd call the collection at DRK MTTR, please don't call it goth, Courtney said. "It means something different to everyone, but I guess dark clothing is a constant. So, while I wouldn't consider my aesthetic goth—more like "dark romantic"—it often happens that people associate the color black with goth, so I get it. I've just simply always been drawn to black and the associations it harbors, the feelings it



Courtney McGee — in black, obviously — poses in her shop, DRK MTTR, located at 128 E Gay St in the space formerly occupied by David Katz Gallery

evokes. I feel like it forces you to be more creative when putting a fit together. You need to vary texture, scale, accessories, etc., to add interest and depth to your look. But yes, I do remember, when I was young, being told that my closet looked like I was always going to a funeral and getting in trouble for painting my nails black."

Courtney said that she really has no primary demographic at DRK MTTR. "Because black is so universal, it really lends itself to any age group, any aesthetic, any gender. It's mutable and adapts so well to whatever the individual brings to it. So, my primary demographic is just... not well defined."

Courtney is a one-woman show, at least for now. "I curate every single piece that comes in; everything is cleaned, steamed, and mended (if needed). I love visual merchandising, so I also design the look in my windows. Oh, and I also upcycle select pieces in the shop—hand-painted items, embroidered items, etc.)."

She's a one-woman show with a big support system, however. Married to her high school sweetheart, Kyle, "who is my absolute biggest supporter, my inspiration and my one true love," the pair have "two amazing kids, a beagle named Cosmo, and a sphynx named Loki." During her downtime, Courtney loves going to shows, both theatrical and rock concerts—she emailed us from a Sisters of Mercy show in Philly—and "doing anything that involves creating something new, being out in nature, and spending time with the people I love."

While the shop obviously takes up a lot of Courtney's time. "While I love everything about it, and the kids are both very supportive (my daughter can sometimes be found on register!), it can be demanding. This comes with the territory: I need the outlet the shop provides and have gained so much so quickly. I'm feeling fulfilled in a creative sense, but I'm learning how to keep the work-life balance in perspective. I think I'm getting better at that every day."

The upside is "I really love everything about what I do. I realize that I'm very lucky to be doing something I love every day and when that is the case nothing seems like a burden. But the best part I'd say is getting to talk to my customers. I'm totally a people person and love getting to know someone and helping them define their unique style."

With Courtney as your guide, you needn't be afraid of the DRK MTTR. "Black—whether an all-black ensemble or a choice black piece complementing an otherwise colorful fit—can be leveraged to make a lot of unique statements. I truly feel that black is such a universal color, I would wager most people have something black in their closet. And yes, they need more!"