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Trouble with travel prompts woman to create PupCentric tote

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When Jamye Hickman came back to Brunswick County to visit her parents, naturally she had to bring along her 3-year-old Shi-Tzu, Zoe-Joe.

"But taking her from Atlanta to Bolivia was just cumbersome," said Hickman, a graduate student at Georgia Tech. "First I'd forget her toys, then I'd forget her bowl."

Most of us would just grumble. Hickman, however, is earning a doctorate in engineering psychology, so she knows a thing or two about efficient design. Thanks to her mom, she also knows how to sew. Thus, using a store pattern, she set out to design the perfect canine carry-all bag.

Now her E.B.D. Carry-all - that's E.B.D. as in "Everything But the Dog" - seems to be popping up everywhere. Last year, Pet Product News magazine gave it its Editors Choice Award. The August issue of Everyday With Rachael Ray featured the E.B.D. Carry-all as a "Fave," with a write-up on page 42. Georgia Tech's alumni magazine profiled her as one of the university's top alums aged 30 and younger.

Now, Hickman, 29, has taped a Webcam segment that's scheduled to air on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" this month.



Jamye Hickman, her dog, Zoe-Joe, and the E.B.D. Carry-all Hickman created.

It's been quite a ride for Hickman, a 1997 graduate of South Brunswick High School. She's careful to give a lot of the credit to her mom and dad, James and Ollie Hickman of Bolivia, who supported her education and helped underwrite her first business ventures.

An honors student in high school, Hickman went on to graduate from Meredith College in 2001, where she credits teachers for igniting a passion for science. At Georgia Tech, she earned a master's degree in 2004 in engineering psychology, a field also known as ergonomics or the human factor.

"It means understanding the human component of things," she said, "how the human interacts with technology. You need to know who's using a product, their capabilities and limitations.

"Have you every bought something that pretty much sucked?" she added with a giggle. "If it ran slow, or a button didn't work or you kept pushing a button you didn't mean to? That's all part of engineering psychology, or what we try to avoid."

Hickman's speciality is called "cognitive aging," which means adapting products for the needs of older people. She has published articles on the subject in scholarly journals ,and she hopes to make it a career.

In the meantime, though, she saw a chance to fill the needs of what she calls "pet parents." Thinking about a better pet bag, she talked to friends with dogs and spent time observing in dog parks to get an idea of what was needed.

The E.B.D. Carry-all got its name after enough people exclaimed, "Gee, you thought of everything!" Each bag contains collapsible bowls for food and water, a freezeable gel pack to chill doggie treats and an indoor/outdoor blanket. Exterior pockets can hold pens and cell phones. Separate lined pockets can hold waste bags and sanitizers. Eight inside pockets will hold anything else you forgot; there's even a zippered pouch attached for vet records.

Hickman likens her brown carry-alls to messenger bags. They come with different designer linings, in colors Hickman calls "Bluish," "Steel" and "Lime-ish," in patterns of her own design. For an added price, the dog's name can be embroidered on the bag and miscellaneous "bling" can be applied.

"It's got to be cute," the inventor said. "It's got to be stylish."

Hickman launched her own company, now called PupCentric, arranged manufacturing and debuted her design at a pet industry trade show in 2006.

Meanwhile, she had another idea. She had been packing gift baskets for friends and including puppy waste pick-up bags. "But I thought, 'These things are so *ugly!*'" she recalled. That led to "Cwick-Ups," stylish bags in seven different colors keyed to match the E.B.D. Carry-all. Sold under the slogan, "Why does poop have to be drab?" the Cwick-Ups sell for \$6 per 60-count package.

Hickman now has her own Web site, www.pupcentric.com, marketing her carry-alls at \$49.95. (Embroidery and bling come extra.) Her products are also popping up in pet boutiques around the country. (None in Wilmington, alas; the nearest retail outlets include Mais Oui! in Greenville and La Di Dogs in Raleigh.)

Right now, she's focusing on finishing her Ph.D. requirements by the end of the year. After that, she'd like to teach at the college level, but she plans to keep her company - Pet/Human Designs, or PHD for short - and she's thinking about new ideas.

"I'm not a girly-girl, I'm like, more practical," she said, "but I know some people would like more color."

She's also thinking about extending the product line, adding some different doggie toys and maybe a dog bed.

Getting back to North Carolina is a big part of her long-term plans, she said. And, when she has time, she wants to write children's books with her mother.

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