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## BUSINESS

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# Boutique owner: Somerville is 'Absolutely Fabulous'

BY PAUL LAROCCO

For the Journal

It turns out Mara Loeber's failure to find inexpensive storefront property for her vintage boutique in New York's East Village was one of the best things to happen to her. Instead of becoming just another quirky second-hand shop inhabiting SoHo, Loeber's Absolutely Fabulous boutique jumps out at you on a mostly residential stretch of Beacon Street. And maybe more importantly, the culturally diverse community of Somerville has no problem with this.

Since opening in January 2001, Absolutely Fabulous has gained a devoted following of locals while its diverse collection of vintage clothing, glassware and general bric-a-brac helped it earn "The Improper Bostonian's" award for Best Vintage Store. Loeber's way of running the shop may have something to do with Absolutely Fabulous earning the award in only its first year of operation.

"The store is me," said Loeber, who runs the boutique alone. "Every time we get a customer, it's like someone is coming into my home and I'm entertaining them."

Loeber also attributes the store's instant success to the personal attention she gives each customer. She keeps a log book on customer requests, and will attempt to hunt down items she does not carry. This one-on-one interaction is made possible by the store's low-key location.

"It's not like I'm on Mass. Ave., where everything's transient," Loeber said. "In that case, I'd never know many of my customers."

She may have not known any of her customers if she had stayed in her native city to open the boutique. Born in the Bronx and most recently a resident of Manhattan's East Village, Loeber would have

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Mara Loeber, owner,  
Absolutely Fabulous

operated Absolutely Fabulous from New York if it wasn't for sky-high commercial rents. She moved to Somerville because she appreciated its unique and diversity over Boston and its chain stores.

"Somerville's like a mini-East Village, filled with artisans," she said.

Perhaps then the city may be the perfect place to sell Asian paper lamps, airport chairs from the 1950s in every color of the rainbow, and one of Loeber's favorites, a "funky" lima bean-blue vinyl couch. To find these oddball decors, Loeber will scavenge flea markets, estate sales and accept all hawkers or peddlers with items to offer.

"A lot of people just pull up in big vans filled with stuff," she said.

"I get a lot of my items from locals."

Whether buying or selling, the customers continue to shuffle into Absolutely Fabulous. The vintage industry is booming all over, and Loeber credits this to the quality of older products.

"You're going to spend \$500 now for that type of clothing. Just look at the stitching, buttons and belts," she said. "And the glassware was made a lot heavier. You can pick it up and it doesn't feel like it's going to break in your hands."

But Loeber's day is made not by finding a sturdy piece of fabric, but rather that weird or retro piece that would be perfect in your apartment. Last Thursday was one of those days. Loeber used a day off to go to an old fire station and pick up a bunch of large, red industrial-size lockers. She said they'll be perfect in her store's window.

Reason to celebrate? Maybe, but at Absolutely Fabulous, like the famous British sitcom that inspired the boutique's name, a reason isn't always needed.

"Of course," Loeber said. "We've popped many bottles of champagne."