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Curvy Girl carves out a following with sassy styles in sizes 14-28

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Laura Poorman grabs a lemony yellow halter dress from a clothes rack set up in the dining room of her Northeast Portland home. She holds the top of the dress to her chest with one hand, cinches it at her waist with the other.

"Look how cute this is," she says.

A high-quality designer-of-the-moment dress costs hundreds of dollars and comes in sizes no larger than 14. The Curvy Girl version has some of the same sass and style, but sells for about \$40 and comes in sizes 14-28.

Three sisters founded Curvy Girl Clothing based on a simple concept: big, not boring. Poorman, 32, and Mi'Lane Cremeans, 34, live in Portland. Poorman's twin sister, Lisa Toton, lives in Los Angeles. All three stand 6-feet-1 and have more curves than a winding mountain road.

"We grew up in Chicago in a neighborhood of tiny Italians," Cremeans says.

"We couldn't hide," Poorman says.

They liked stylish clothes but had a hard time finding them. Most clothes cut to size seemed better suited for older women with more conservative tastes and bigger budgets. Poorman liked the trendy fashions offered at Forever 21 and joked that what they needed was a "Forever 22," referring to the common large size. After reading a business story on the growth potential of the large-size clothing market, the three sisters decided to launch their company online.

They thought the apparel industry's "plus size" designation sounded frumpy.

"Curvy is bombshell," Poorman says.

Curvy Girl specializes in brands – including their own – of trendy, moderately priced fashions. They sell online through eBay and also curvygirlclothing.com to customers in the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe. This week, they added a brick-and-mortar outlet through Dirty Little Secret Salon & Spa in Portland. If sales continue as projected, Poorman expects Curvy Girl to top \$600,000 this year.

"I'm a Poorman," she says, "but I hope to become a rich woman."

Racks of dresses

in her basement The basement of Poorman's house looks like the stockroom of an overcrowded department store. Racks of dresses hang in rows. Stacks of boxes lean against one wall. The doorbell rings, and it's a UPS man with a delivery of more boxes.

Curvy Girl stock consists of a mix of dresses and separates from large-size manufacturers. Poorman hopes that eventually, 80 percent of the stock will bear their Curvy Girl label. For now, the private label represents about 35 percent of their sales. They have Curvy Girl clothes manufactured in small factories in Los Angeles.

"It's a misnomer that clothes made in the States are expensive," Poorman says.

High-quality designer clothes that require hand-tailoring, hand-beading or highly skilled seamstresses are often produced overseas, she says. Simple shapes, unlined styles, laser cuts and no overseas shipping and import costs keep Curvy Girl's prices low. Casual dress prices run \$30 to \$50. More formal styles, \$90 to \$140.

"I love eyelet, but too much and you look like a curtain," says Poorman, holding up a white eyelet top.

Outfits offer

multiple outlooks One of their top sellers is a synthetic stretch jersey wrap dress. The fabric surprises a lot of customers, says Poorman, who wrongly assumed stretch jersey is not flattering on big bodies.

"Not just a new outfit, a new outlook," Poorman says. "That's one of our taglines."

Many of the Curvy Girl outfits are designed to offer multiple outlooks. Dresses feature adjustable straps. Wide shiny belts have stretchy backs for easy fit. Seamless tube tops fit under low-cut tops for modesty and a layer of color.

Poorman demonstrates how the modest cut of a print top can be gathered into a sexy, plunging neckline. She pulls the strings quickly as though opening and closing window blinds.

"Church/club. Church/club. Church/club," she says.

The sisters had no previous experience in the apparel industry. Poorman, who worked in tech sales and as a fashion model, has an eye for trends and marketing. Cremeans worked in hospitality for a cruise ship company handling much of the logistical orders and shipping. Toton oversees most of the manufacturing because she lives in Los Angeles. But the lines defining their roles are blurry at best. The three sisters were recently in California checking on production.

"They see us three big Amazonians coming . . .," Cremeans said.

"They speak Korean and Spanish and . . .," Poorman interrupts.

"And they wave . . .," interrupts Cremeans.

People who have known each other for many years sometimes finish each others' sentences. That can be endearing. These sisters simply interrupt each others' sentences. It can get annoying.

Sometimes they get frustrated with each other and stop talking altogether,

"Then Mom calls and says, 'OK, girls,'" Cremeans says.

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