

# Makeover maven



RANDY SIKER | NM5W

## Serial entrepreneur creates mini-empire focused on image and fitness

BY HALEY WACHORFF | SPECIAL TO NM5W

New Mexico has a casual vibe when it comes to style, even in the business world. But if you've ever worn flip-flops into the boardroom, it could be time to turn yourself in to the fashion police.

Meet Gillian Armour. She promises to be kind.

Armour, president and owner of Gillian Armour Image Consulting, has built a career on helping the fashion-challenged dress to impress, shop with confidence and put their best foot forward — in appropriate shoes, of course.

Armour's individual clients come to her for help with everything from a complete makeover to building an office-ready wardrobe. She tells them what colors look best on them and what cuts of clothing will flatter them, and takes them shopping to put that knowledge into action. She also has retail and corporate clients who pay her to educate their employees on the basics of professional dress and etiquette.

Armour is passionate about her message: appearance matters.

"First impressions count, and they are made within the first few seconds of meeting people, before you even open your

mouth," she says. "It's in our DNA as human beings. Unconsciously, the mind registers and rates and very quickly determines if this person is worth my time."

Armour's love affair with fashion began when she sewed her first original outfits at the age of 10. As a teenager, she spent hours poring over *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines in the library. She moved to Los Angeles when she was 19, enrolled in fashion school and took a retail position with I. Magnin after graduation. In her 20-year corporate career, she worked as a buyer, fashion director and production manager for companies such as Macy's, Harrods and Jessica McClintock.

When she and her husband decided to leave California for Hawaii in 2001, Gillian Armour Image Consulting was born. The business came along when they relocated to the Land of Enchantment in 2007, and the state got its first and only Association of Image Consultants International certified image consultant.

Armour says one of the keys to creating a successful one-woman consulting firm has been operating a debt-free business. A self-described serial entrepreneur, Armour lets one strong business feed another fledgling business. Her first independent venture

was selling her own art and jewelry, which helped support the cost of getting the image consulting agency up and running in Hawaii.

In New Mexico, she has diversified by landing the rights to develop a fitness concept called Adventure Boot Camp for Women in the state. Armour first discovered Adventure Boot Camp, month-long outdoor fitness training classes, while living in Hawaii. A lack of physical fitness is often a barrier to a positive self-image, so Armour felt the boot camp would complement her image consulting work. Her Albuquerque Adventure Boot Camp for Women has been rapidly successful, training 200 women in six separate groups in less than a year.

The cash flow from the boot camps has helped cover the initial costs for a profitable new line of business for Gillian Armour Image Consulting — online consultation and training. In the past year, Armour has ramped up her online presence, offering consulting sessions via Skype for clients outside New Mexico, some as far away as Italy and Switzerland. She is also offering online training to students interested in becoming image consultants.

Armour is a big believer in the power of online marketing. In the early days of her business, she says she learned the hard way that paying a high-priced publicist didn't bring her any more clients than a few well-placed Internet ads, word-of-mouth and in-person networking did. Now she advertises sparingly and almost exclusively

through blogs, including the Duke City Fix and Internet sites such as active.com and Craigslist.

The financially conservative, self-sustaining model is paying off. Armour's first fiscal year in New Mexico, 2008, closed with revenue of \$53,000. With the success of the Albuquerque Adventure Boot Camp for Women and a strong start for the online consulting work, Gillian Armour Design LLC — the umbrella entity for all Armour's endeavors — is on target to bring in \$125,000 in 2009.

While Armour is not being booked for many corporate appearances this year due to budget cuts, she is seeing an uptick in the number of clients coming to her for help polishing their image as they start a job hunt or try to move up the corporate ladder in challenging times.

"This is the time for image consultants to shine, because we really can help people retain jobs, get new jobs and build those skills they need to increase their visibility," she says.

It helps that Armour's services aren't as expensive as the phrase "image consultant" might lead you to believe, says client Kathy Trickey, owner of KT Global Leadership Solutions and Cultural Bridge Builder. She was pleasantly surprised to find that Armour's introductory package starts at \$175. Trickey says her work puts her in front of large audiences for presentations on leadership and management, and the confidence boost she gained from learning how to break out of an all-black wardrobe rut and present herself in the best light has been well worth the money.

"People listen more to someone who projects well in their image and way of speaking," Trickey says. "I thought I'd never be able to go shopping without her, but I have learned to do that, and that's an affirmation of her, that she starts you off well and teaches you in such a way that you're not likely to give up."

For Armour, it's that lasting personal confidence that makes the work of image consulting more than skin deep.

### Vital Stats:

**Company names:** Gillian Armour Design LLC, Gillian Armour Image Consulting, Albuquerque Adventure Boot Camp for Women and nonprofit, Best Dressed  
**Key person:** Gillian Armour, owner and president  
**Address:** P.O. Box 26748, Albuquerque  
**Phone:** (505) 246-2457, (800) 591-2353  
**Web site:** www.gillianarmour.com, www.albuquerquebootcamp.com, www.bestdressed.org  
**Employees:** Four contracted boot camp fitness trainers  
**Revenue:** \$53,000 in 2008; projected revenue of \$125,000 in 2009

### Strategies:

1. Build online training and consulting business to supplement in-person image consulting income
2. Focus on online marketing, including blogs
3. Launch Albuquerque Adventure Boot Camp for Women to complement the goals of image-consulting clients