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Premium Stuff: Vaya Bags Have Arrived at Bicycle Roots!

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So, we ordered a whole bunch of bags from Queens-based manufacturer Vaya Bags. And then something strange occurred—before we realized what was happening, our crew members started showing up to work toting Vaya bags. Whether you choose the Hip Pouch like Sara or the Medi Messenger Bag just like Joe, you'll feel crescent fresh riding around town with your very own Vaya bag. And if you look good, you feel good—especially when you realize that Vaya Bags is a company with a conscience.

We hopped on our bikes and headed over to the Vaya Bags workshop and store in Ridgewood, Queens, to find out more about the women behind the brand. We were graciously greeted by Tianna (Tia) Meilinger, founder of Vaya Bags, who filled us in on all the details surrounding the establishment of Vaya, her commitment to supporting the causes she cares about, and what it was like to meet Joseph Gordon Levitt on the set of Premium Rush, this summer's bike messenger-centric thriller.

It was a sunny and humid late-August afternoon when I rolled into Queens to meet the ladies behind Vaya Bags. Of course, I'd met Angie when she stopped by Bicycle Roots with some samples and then returned toting our orders—delivered directly to our door by bicycle, completely apropos considering *Premium Rush* had hit theatres just a day or so earlier. In fact, Vaya tries to deliver their products to vendors by bike whenever feasible. In addition to Angie, Vaya also uses a bike messenger to deliver their products, only employing a van when the load is too large or the vendor is far away.



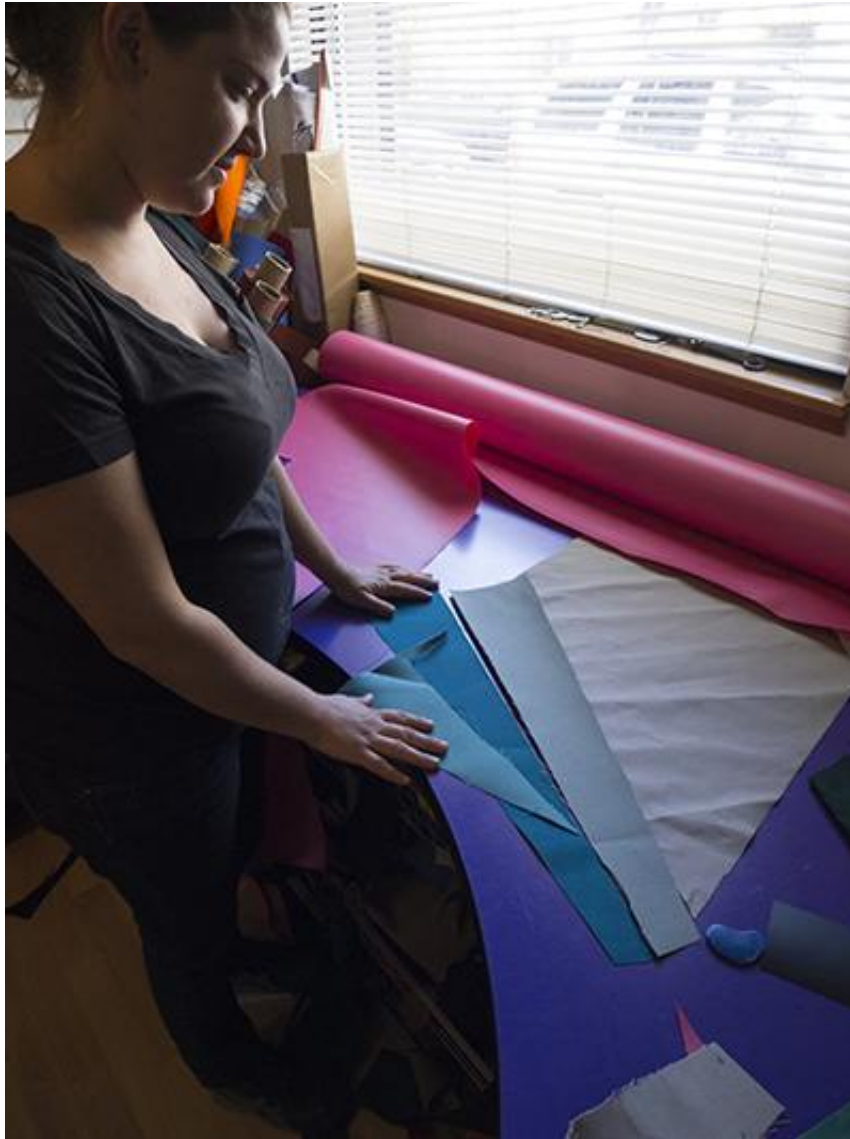
Vaya's storefront on a quiet street in Ridgewood, Queens.

The staff at Bicycle Roots was immediately impressed by the quality of these bags. The materials used were sturdy and would stand up to regular use, the colors vibrant. Even deep-color dyes did not rub off on skin or clothing. The bags' exterior is fabricated from scrap marine canvas (used for sailboat awnings) and/or used bicycle tubes, donated by shipyards and local bike shops, respectively. The bags are lined with truck tarp, ensuring that no matter what you're carrying, your gear stays dry in any weather conditions.

Vaya is a small company, run by three women who cut, sew, and sell all their bags. Founded by Tianna Meilinger in 2005, Vaya Bags has a small storefront in Ridgewood from which all company operations take place.

A native of Long Island, NY, Tia studied environmental science at Boston University. Like many a poor college student, she began riding as a way to save money on transportation. She found it necessary to have a bag capable of carrying her books, gear, and other personal effects. But the bag she bought soon began to wear out. Unable to replace her bag in a cost-effective manner, Tia stubbornly kept using her worn-out messenger's bag even after holes began to form. "Then I began

to lose my stuff!" she exclaims. "So I sewed myself a bag."



Tia arranges scraps of truck tarp and marine canvas in the Vaya Bags workshop. Vaya loves to do custom work and will create a custom color scheme or design for you.

Tia received many compliments on her new messenger bag. Eventually, so many of her friends and familiars requested a bag of their own that she began making bags-to-order and to sell at craft fairs. "At the time, I was studying environmental science... I'd even gone to Ecuador, to the Amazonian rainforest to study biodiversity there. I thought I'd be making bags while I looked for a job in the field. Little did I know, the bags would become my job," she shrugs. Her background in environmental science and her ecological values are evident in Vaya's commitment to using salvaged materials to manufacture their products. The marine canvas and bicycle tubes used in the fabrication of Vaya products would otherwise be taking up space in landfills. Using such heavy-duty materials also ensures that these bags are built to last, instead of being replaced every year.

Crafting is in Tia's blood. Her father was an artisan who crafted one-of-a-kind articles of leather

clothing. He then sold his wearable works of art at craft fairs around the country, often bringing the whole family along for the ride. “I remember when I was a kid, going to the leather factory with my father to salvage scrap leather and suede. We’d travel the country attending craft fairs on family vacations,” she says. Once she noticed how popular her bags were, it was only natural that Tia began sewing bags for sale at craft fairs in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, drawing on her childhood experience.

Selling her wares at craft fairs only increased demand for her product. In time, it became obvious to Tia that what had started out as a temporary stopgap between graduation and a “real” job had, in fact, become a real job. She established Vaya Bags in 2005, and in 2006 Vaya products were available to order through their website. Vaya’s bags come in a variety of styles and colors, and they are happy to do custom designs or colors.



Tia Mellinger shows off some of Vaya’s handiwork. A variety of styles are available, from messenger bags in various sizes, to wallets, hip pouches, purses, and more.

In 2011, Tia was contacted by the producers of Premium Rush, the new bicycle-messenger movie filmed right here in New York City. Of course this meant that for reasons of authenticity the actors needed to be outfitted with messenger bags. Several big-name companies sent the production messenger bags, but none were quite right—that is, until a costume-department employee noticed a production assistant wearing a Vaya-made bag.

“The costume department approached the PA, and from there the production contacted me about using Vaya bags in the movie,” Tia says. “We eventually settled on the medi messenger bag—the larger sizes, although more authentic, just didn’t look right on film—and designed a bag just for the movie.”

Because Vaya's bags are so durable, the bags had to be broken in using a sandblaster and bleach to make them appear as though they had been used and abused, even tearing off the reflective strip. "The funny thing is, they destroyed Joseph Gordon Levitte's bag [Wilee in the movie] but Dania's [Ramirez, as Vanessa] was relatively pristine," Tia notes. She visited the Premium Rush props workshop, and even had the chance to talk with Levitt, who she describes as "a pretty normal guy".

When you buy a bag from Vaya, you can rest assured that you have invested in a company with a conscience. Since so many apparel and accessory brands outsource their production to overseas factories, it's nearly impossible to know for sure whether your merchandise was manufactured ethically. Are all workers of age and being paid living wages? Do they work in a well-ventilated area, using well-maintained and safe equipment? Since Vaya's factory is right inside their store, you can see for yourself that they have nothing to hide. Says Tia, "I get emails every day from factories in China, offering to make my bags for 1/3 the cost of what it takes to produce them right here. But that's not what I'm about—it's really important to me that we keep this local, using salvaged materials."



Grace arranges scraps of canvas and assembles a bag in Vaya's factory. When you buy Vaya, you also buy their values, and workers' rights are never neglected in the name of profit.

Vaya is a small company, consisting of Tia and just two employees. The small scale of their operations allows them to focus on quality of product, as well as quality of life and working conditions for their staff. "I could make more money if I charged more for my product or paid my employees less, but I consider my employees to be partners—I take their opinions into consideration when making business decisions. So it's only fair that they're compensated appropriately," she continues. Vaya Bags does not compromise their values for their bottom line, which is why Bicycle Roots is so enthusiastic about our status as a Vaya vendor—oh yeah, and the quality can't be beat at this price point [Ed. Note: that's my professional ex-bicycle messenger opinion!].



Angie letting the world know how happy she is to work at Vaya. Does your job make you smile like that?

Although Vaya now has a store of their own, as well as an online shop, they still visit craft fairs regularly. Their latest adventure took place on September 8th and 9th, with Vaya presenting merchandise at the Renegade Craft Fair in Chicago. "At every craft fair, we get so much interest in our bags," Tia says, explaining why Vaya continues to present their wares in this way. "People always say, 'I love your bags, but I'm not a messenger.' But it doesn't matter whether you're a messenger or not, as long as you're having fun and you feel confident," Tia says. "That's the most important thing." And who wouldn't feel confident while toting a bag by Vaya? You know that your bag is durable, looks cool—and oh yeah, it's eco-friendly and promotes local manufacturing. Now that, dear readers, never goes out of style.