

PLAYING IT BY EAR

By: Agnes Lee

Some names are long and impactful: The Green Coffin You'll Be In If We Don't Save The Earth, Smash the Glass Ceiling and Make Your Thumbprint Green. Others are more playful: Basil Donut, Toyota Sienna and Suggested Stop. These are the names of earrings on the Friends Who Earring Instagram page – posts show vibrant, colorful earrings like green circular studs connected with a silver ring, marbled purple hexagon hoops and black rectangular stud earrings – made by Cate Durudogan and Claire Koster. These earrings proved so popular that the two Northwestern University students turned a hobby into a business that lets bold earrings make bold statements.

It was love at first earring. Their mutual passion for big, bold earrings brought them together in their freshman year, and the two started creating their own jewelry together on Friday nights. One Instagram DM from a hopeful customer led to another, and Friends Who Earring was born. Cate and Claire began selling handcrafted earrings in their hometowns and soon, across the country. The result – 966 sales on Etsy, over 1,000 followers on Instagram and \$17,553 raised in just nine months.

But Friends Who Earring is less about business and rather a labor of love. Cate, born and raised in Chicago, had always accessorized her lengthy brown hair and clear frames with big, dangly earrings, just as Claire complemented her wavy, red hair with big hoops in St. Louis. Before Northwestern, both had learned to make earrings through online videos that taught them to mold acrylic clay into various shapes and patterns, bake the pieces in the oven, assemble

them with hardware and sand off the edges before adding the new piece of jewelry to their collections.

Once they met in the same Peer Advisor group as freshmen and noticed their similar tastes in jewelry, they started asking each other “Want to earring?” (they now use earring as a verb, defined as “an act of radical relaxation, to make earrings + talk about life”) and met up in Cate’s dorm for their self-proclaimed earring parties. By April, they had accumulated collections worth of homemade earrings, and Cate and Claire launched the Friends Who Earring Instagram account to start posting their creations to show friends from school and back home. With their number of Instagram followers growing as more friends and friends of friends followed the account, the comment section filled up with people asking, “Are these still available?” and “I need prices!”

So when direct messages popped up in their inbox asking to buy earrings commemorating LGBT Pride Month in June, Cate and Claire quickly agreed. In line with naming earrings after social justice issues, they planned to further give back to the community by donating 100% of their profits, without any set aside for production costs, to the National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (NQTTCN). Five posts with a table full of earrings priced \$6 to \$12 later, NQTTCN received \$881. (Cate and Claire donated the full amount without saving a portion to cover supplies. They now recognize their mistake: “I told you we were terrible businesswomen!” Cate says.)

Once Cate and Claire went back to their respective homes in Chicago and St. Louis for the summer amidst this recent success, both, of course, continued to earring on their own. They

maintained the business model of selling earrings and donating profits, and chose The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES) for July's sales. Claire started selling at local events like Tower Grove Farmers Market in St. Louis while Cate made earrings ready for pick up in the Chicago area. By the end of the month, the girls raised \$4,891.

But the increased attention to Friends Who Earring led to a larger customer base. The first person to DM or comment on Instagram could claim a set of earrings, but determining who exactly the first person was proved difficult with DMs occasionally disappearing. For better organization, they set up an Etsy shop in September, which cleaned up the purchasing process for customers and sped up the shipping process by providing Cate and Claire with customer information and shipping labels ready for packaging with just a single glance at the website. "Not to be an ad for Etsy, but it makes it really easy for us," Cate says regarding the fee they pay Etsy for setting up shop on the online service.

When they got back to campus for the fall, their earrings began making their way into the Northwestern community. Interim Vice President for Student Affairs Julie Payne-Kirchmeier gave them a shoutout on Instagram, writing that they "truly live the Northwestern value of care and community." As much as these exciting "in the wild" sightings have increased since April, very few students know the faces behind their earrings. Claire begins, "There was this one day when I was walking to the library, and someone had our earrings on, and then I got to the library and the person sitting in front of me was on our Etsy page. It was kind of fun!"

Even though Friends Who Earring cuts into their school and social lives, Cate and Claire don't want anything to change. "Our aspirations are to do it for as long as we can," Cate says. "We're really happy about it."