





Fashion Fixture

Fifteen months ago police burst into a warehouse behind Auckland fashion house Insidious Fix, seizing hundreds of marijuana plants and arresting director Jason Crawford. With the label's reputation in tatters, fellow founder and designer Kylee Davis shut up shop. Now she's back. SARAH LANG meets comeback Kylee.

SARAH LANG IS A NORTH & SOUTH STAFF WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY SCOTT VENNING.

On Saturday October 15 2005, Kylee Davis was all glammed up and buzzing, celebrating the 10th birthday of her fêted fashion label Insidious Fix. Friends, family, fashionistas and VIPs were gathered at hip club Studio on Auckland's K Road, enjoying live acts including Kora and Recloose, sipping special-recipe mint-and-ginger "Fixated" cocktails and watching catwalk models strut Fix garb.

For the hostess that event marked a decade of such parties shunned for long nights poring over business books and sketchpad: hard yakka well worth it. Davis was just 20 when she and then-boyfriend Jason Crawford launched Insidious Fix in 1995. Known for its funky style and enduring quality, the staunchly New Zealand-made label swiftly burgeoned into a fashion heavyweight at home. By 2005 it had expanded into Australia and was gearing up to take on the US, Asian and European markets.

Three days after the birthday bash, Insidious Fix earned its start-ing-block honours at Air New Zealand Fashion Week with what was by all accounts a spectacular show. Thirty retro Mini Cooper cars conveyed guests in convoy from Auckland's central-city Hilton hotel to a Greenlane warehouse to view the Winter 2006 collection "Progression Addiction". Ten super-sized screens zoomed in on models stalking the catwalk in colourful knits, skinny pants and short shorts. Post-applause, Davis and Crawford took a curtain call on mini chopper bikes.

But a month later the fashion wonder girl's world imploded. Around 8am on November 21, police swooped into the Auckland industrial district of Onehunga and burst into a building behind the Insidious Fix headquarters where they found equipment used to grow cannabis. Discovering a tunnel leading to the building next door, they uncovered a hydroponic cannabis-growing setup and seized 230 plants with a street value of more than \$1 million.

Detective Sergeant David Nimmo says the operation was "very sophisticated", spread over two floors with electricity seemingly tapped directly from a transformer on the property, while a maze of tubes and hoses fed and watered the "thriving, manicured" plants, many the size of small trees. The area was well ventilated and had a temperature-control system, he says, with plant care carefully documented on whiteboard charts. There was also a room for nurturing seedlings.

Contrary to some media reports, the plant-peppered premises were not owned or operated by Insidious Fix. But after the raid, police burst into Fix HQ and arrested Crawford (who immediately resigned his directorship). Davis, after calling her lawyer, refused to speak to the detectives.

As breakfasters tut-tutted over their *Heralds* and *Dominion Posts*, rumours started swirling: that a secret passage led to the drug den that some sort of "equipment" was found on the premises of Insidious Fix: more than just a gardening book, clearly! If Crawford knew about this, surely Davis must have also. After all, they used to go out, didn't they? (Though Davis doesn't volunteer the information, she later confirms she and Crawford were an item from 1992 to 1997.)

Further fuel stoked the gossip fire when (after a depositions hearing) newspapers reported on court documents: according to police, a system of doors, a tunnel and manholes connected the "greenhouse" with the Insidious Fix HQ, closed-circuit television

cameras filmed anyone approaching, police radios were monitored by electronic scanners and air filters kept the smell of the cannabis from neighbours.

With the trial of Crawford and three other men not scheduled until November 2007 (he's on bail, having pleaded not guilty to charges of receiving stolen goods as well as initial counts of cultivating cannabis, possessing growing equipment and allowing a premises to be used for the drug's cultivation), Davis can't answer questions about case details.

North & South has been advised she was not a police suspect.

It's the fag end of 2006 and Davis, 32, stands surveying the old Insidious Fix building — now a vacant warehouse — on the shabby old block in Onehunga's industrial backblocks where her dreams were born and died.

Wholesomely pretty, she speaks softly, precisely, with just a hint of a lisp and the good old Kiwi rising inflection at the end of her sentences. She's serene and seemingly unflappable, even when talking about the drug bust.

"It was a bombshell. I had so many emotions: anger, hurt, stress, all bubbling away. Insidious Fix was my child — I gave birth to it, nourished it. I spent over 10 years building it, I had sacrificed so much to have it, and I was really proud of what I'd achieved. Then boom, it was gone. It was incredibly sad for it all to end, and to end because of that [the drug bust] was pretty devastating."

With Crawford arrested immediately, Davis didn't have the chance to yell at him. In fact, she's never yelled. "Unfortunately I'm not an angry kind of person, not one for confrontation. I'm really internal and find it difficult to get angry or to vent. I felt more emotional, so upset. But I couldn't afford to be losing the plot and spinning out — I felt like I had to stay really together for the staff who were devastated and upset. Everyone was in disbelief. For a long time it felt really surreal. But we had to fight for the business."

Number-one priority was meeting delivery deadlines to show it was business as usual. But that same week, while machinery was being moved, a knitting machine fell on one of her key employees, Reece Phillips, clipping him across the throat. "He was in hospital for six weeks — the doctors feared he might never speak again."

Her voice starts splintering a little. "The drug scandal was one thing but Reece had worked with us for many years and become a good friend. When you're worried about somebody's life, your focus changes." After a tracheotomy and four additional operations he got his voice back, a shade deeper than previously.

With Phillips the only worker who could operate all the machinery, production ground to a halt, stirring fears the winter range might not be ready for February delivery.

"I couldn't relax I was so stressed. I had to take each day at a time and relied on my friends and family and partner [Mat Rankin] to help get me through it." Barely snoring three hours' sleep, Davis delivered on time.

While she initially hoped to keep the company afloat — vowing in the *Herald* to carry on — she gradually realised the business was too damaged to survive. "The scandal tarnished the label's name, my name, my reputation and the credibility of the business." Many customers panicked, thinking the factory was closing and they wouldn't get their winter orders. Some withdrew orders; others

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The ride before the fall: *Insidious Fix* principals Jason Crawford and Kylee Davis at 2005 Air New Zealand Fashion Week.





Deadline pending: Davis discusses new sketch details with production manager Jenny Thompson (centre) and design assistant Jo Wulf.

didn't pay their bills. And with the trial set down two years away Davis figured media exposure would be ongoing.

In May 2006 she called the staff in — including the very first employee, Saieri, a machinist who had worked there for nine years — to tell them she was shutting up shop and they were being made redundant. “It was horrible. Everyone was really, really sad. I felt so sad to have to end that huge part of my life.”

But by that point Davis had discovered she and Rankin, her partner of six years, were expecting a baby (“not exactly planned but we were happy about it”). “My focus changed super fast. I wanted to have a really healthy pregnancy and didn't want to put negative energy into my baby and my future. I'd been through enough.” Munro David Rankin was born on October 2, after a 16-hour labour, a water birth with zero painkillers.

Davis didn't exactly spend her pregnancy with her feet up reading “how-to” baby books. In August, heavily pregnant, she celebrated the launch of new label Stitch Ministry (a collaboration with fashion industry businessman Jason Gitmans).

From one label to the next, from one Jason to the next, in a matter of months. Quick work.

“I needed to move on and start again quickly — I didn't want the drug scandal to keep overshadowing everything. I certainly wasn't going to let it take me out. I still had a lot of dreams to fulfil and I was quite adamant I was going to have my own label. I just didn't know exactly how I was going to do it.”

During chats with industry contacts, one name kept coming up: Jason Gitmans. The managing director of family company Gitmans Knitwear, over 12 years he's turned the business into one of the biggest importers and suppliers of knitwear to New Zealand labels.

“When Kylee rang me up I said, ‘Hey, I was about to call you!’” says Gitmans, a roguish 37-year-old. “I was overseas when I heard what had happened to Insidious Fix and I joked to a friend, ‘Let's go grab Miss Davis.’”

Both she and he were keen to start up a label, but wanted a business partner.

“Who wouldn't want to go into business with Kylee? She's a very talented designer who set up her own company from scratch and made a great fist of it. And she's been through the school of hard

knocks and survived — that takes balls. So yeah, we realised we had the same dream and got to it.”

Between April and August they oversaw the conversion of an empty warehouse into Stitch HQ, dreamed up the label concept, put together the first collection and arranged most of the distribution and marketing.

Aimed at fashion-conscious metropolitans, Stitch Ministry comprises mainly knits, from sexy sweaters and vintage shorts to flattering merino dresses. Plus there's two “side dishes”: a woven range of smart pants, jackets and shirts, and street-style T-shirts and hoodies. “It's boutique wear with a street attitude,” says Davis, “provocative, sophisticated, a little bit dark and moody”.

With Gitmans overseeing business minutiae, design director Davis has more time to concentrate on what she does best. In June she whirled through LA, London, Barcelona, Paris and Berlin, hunting design inspiration. Returning, she worked from early morning until midnight to finish the designs while pregnant.

Snapped up by buyers here and across the Tasman, the aptly titled first “Resurrection” collection (Autumn/Winter 2007) will hit the shelves nationwide from February 23 and in Australia from March. In line with the label's signature — “adorned with the high symbolism of worship” — each Resurrection piece has a unique name, such as the Handmaidens, Hellfire Harlot and Justice of the Piece, and the streetwear range sports voodoo-style prints.

Stitch Ministry has already picked up 56 accounts in boutique and streetwear stores, including 20 in Australia. As we went to press an Italian deal was being negotiated, and research was underway into taking the label elsewhere in Europe.

Davis has no hesitation about going global so soon. “If you think small the results are small and vice versa.”

High-flying fashion designer Adrian Hailwood (whose casual, funky garments sell in London, Los Angeles, Japan, Dubai, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand) believes Stitch Ministry will attract a similar cult following to Davis' previous label. “Insidious Fix was really renowned — people would ask, ‘Oh, is that an Insidious top?’ Again Kylee's doing something a bit different with this new label: that whole dark streak will get people intrigued.”

In 2002 Hailwood travelled with Davis on a Trade New Zealand-funded trip to Los Angeles and has stayed in touch since. “Kylee's got a fantastic eye for design. I remember seeing her stuff in



Workshop years ago and being blown away. She's a charming girl, a sweetheart who gets on with pretty much everyone. And she's a stayer. This industry is a really hard slog just to survive."

Hailwood says no-one he knows in the industry suspected Davis had been involved in the drug operation. "Kylee has a great name and reputation. People know her straight-up personality — doing something like that just isn't her. I knew she'd be back all guns blazing. And here she is."

A few streets away from where Insidious Fix was based in Onehunga, Stitch Ministry headquarters is wedged next to Gitmans Knitwear among a giant jigsaw of concrete buildings. There's something deliciously incongruous about hip gear being conceived in such unpromising surroundings.

Industrial roller doors reveal a sparse reception area, where a tall, dishy bloke with a mop of curly hair bends over a coiffured poodle almost as large as himself. He introduces himself and his charge: it's Mat Rankin — Davis' partner and the label's marketing manager — and two-year-old Blinky. (Usually Rankin's mini-me is smaller — the couple usually bring baby Munro to work and juggle care there.)

It's no myth that the fashion world works a year in advance. Well before the summer of 2006 has properly shown its face in Auckland, the deadline for Stitch Ministry's Spring/Summer 07/08 range looms large. Davis eats a quick sandwich in the open-to-view workroom to the right, before the key handover meeting of her second collection's sketches to the production team.

You'd never know she's been getting up at 5am and working 14-hour days to finish the sketches. She seems serene, wearing a cardigan over a flattering Stitch Ministry dress ("though I can only just get into it with this bloody baby weight!"), breaching any mumsy air with a little nose stud and one long, thin earring piercing two points of her left ear.

The workroom's a busy space. A skinny wooden table is littered with coils of measuring tape and books about voodoo, while

religious illustrations and serpent pictures form a psychedelic wall collage.

Meeting time. Davis and design assistant Jo Wulf (one of two ex-Insidious Fix employees Davis brought to her new label) discuss the sketch details with production manager Jenny Thompson, who'll turn the designs into samples. Davis clearly and calmly explains exactly how she wants these tubular sleeves, and that a shirt needs to be "a bit slouchy, definitely not fitted".

Directly opposite the workroom, factory shop The Vault — open for business from February 23 — is the physical incarnation of the label's "congregation at worship" theme. Blank the clothes and you'd think you were in a chapel. Not just because of the vaulted roof — faux

stained-glass windows shed light and thick red-velvet curtains cloak the confessionals, aka the dressings rooms. Racks of garments veil all four walls and stack the "shelves", 80-year-old wooden church pews which Davis snapped up on Trade Me. "We wanted to create a strong identity and a sensory experience people will remember, so it's 'wow, that's cool', not another 'same old' shop".

Art aficionados and bored boyfriends can saunter through to the gallery, a roomy alcove exhibiting the work of one up-and-coming New Zealand artist per season, all for sale.

This season the chosen one is Gene Kirkpatrick, with his pop-art paintings and close-up photos of ordinary objects such as clothes drying on the line. Every season the chosen artist will design the symbols featured on the label's sideline tees-and-hoodies range. "To hook in our congregation young," Davis quips.

There should be no surprise Kylee Davis would make frocks and that she'd be successful — and also a bit of a maverick. After all, this was a girl who sewed her first bikini at five.

Born in May 1974, she grew up in a notorious pink-and-white house in Manurewa, South Auckland. The baby of seven, she was doted on by five older brothers and a much older sister: "Well looked after and looked out for."

Father John ran a road-contracting business and her mother owned the eponymously titled bridal boutique "Gloria Anne Davis". Gloria made all her daughter's clothes and taught her the tricks of the rag trade.

"It was a bit of a giggle — she'd come into the shop and try to get the women at work to sew a zipper in on the sly," Gloria laughs. "But apart from the pretty clothes, Kylee was a bit of a tomboy."

From 11 she held down a succession of part-time jobs: first the local dairy, down the road to a fish-and-chip shop, then to a toy store. To earn extra money one year she trawled along Manurewa, painting shop windows in Christmas theme.

At 13 it was on with the braces and on to the bus into town to the

Brother Sean killed himself in 2003, aged 39. It wasn't a huge shock to his little sister "It was what he needed to do and it was about him and it wasn't about me, the family or anyone else."

private Diocesan School For Girls, where though never an academic star she continued to do well. Until fourth form when, as her parents' marriage began disintegrating, she started doing "typical turning-into-a-teenager stuff" — losing interest in schoolwork and slipping out to see her first boyfriend.

When she was 15, three incidents in a month put her parents on edge. The family had moved to a two-hectare property on a rural Manukau road, so Davis was learning to drive to get into town. While her parents were away in Australia, she wrapped their stationwagon around a power pole. Then, as she burned rubbish in the back paddock on a sunny, windy day, the dry grass caught fire and six fire engines had to come to save the house. The "final straw" was a girls' night that purportedly started out as an innocent slumber party. "Dad came home to find we'd all been in the alcohol cabinet and I was KO-ed, unconscious. I think Mum and Dad were ready to put me out on the doorstep."

Shortly afterwards her parents split in a separation Davis calls "the opposite of amicable". No longer applying herself at school, she realised she was wasting her time and her parents' money. "I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life but I had an inner confidence I'd be okay."

It'd certainly be hard for a Davis to escape an entrepreneurial streak. Kylee's parents and four of her siblings own their own businesses. Mum Gloria's father, uncle and most of her cousins opted for self-employment.

At the end of her sixth form year, when a friend applied for a fashion course (the Certificate of Apparel Technology and Administration) at the Auckland Institute of Technology, Davis decided she'd apply too: "I'd been passionate about clothes all my life and suddenly thought, 'Can I make a job out of it?'" With just a couple of days before applications closed, she pulled together a portfolio from garments she'd made at home and in her school fashion design option. She got in, farewelled Dio, moved out of home and went flatting in town.

At AIT in 1992 she met Jason Crawford. Though initially writing him off as a hapless Tauranga bogan, she got to know him while working with him on an assignment. Crawford was already ensconced in the fashion world, doing an apprenticeship with his uncle Graham Boulton, who owned one of the biggest knitwear businesses in the country (Earlybird Knitwear).

Within months the design duo were an inseparable couple. "Jason really inspired me. He was an entrepreneur, very motivated and driven. I was straight out of school, very naïve, quite young, and I just thought, 'Wow, this guy is amazing!'"

"He had so many goals, which gave me the boost to set my own. So I set one small goal — to get an A for my first assignment at tech — and achieved it easily. Once I got into that way of thinking I built on the goals and ended up being a top student."

When the two-year course finished at the end of 1992, Davis moved to the capital to study fashion further at Wellington Polytech. Crawford remained in Auckland, but they stayed a couple. When the 1995 Benson & Hedges Fashion Awards came along, they worked together on an entry over the Christmas holidays and the innovative three-piece knitwear collection won both the Lifestyle and the Supreme Awards.

It was their big break. With the \$10,000 cash prize and invaluable publicity, they decided to start up their own label. Crawford's uncle guaranteed a bank loan and they bought the most basic knitting machines and leased a factory. Enter Insidious Fix.

The hours were taxing by anyone's standards: 17- and 18-hour

days, seven days a week, before collapsing on a fold-out couch in the factory. "To get that business off the ground Jason and I literally did everything — we even dyed our own fabrics."

In 1997, Davis caught a bug in Bangkok during a research trip. When she got home doctors couldn't diagnose what the virus was, but told her she'd compromised her immune system by running herself into the ground. Her relationship with Crawford ended but they remained close colleagues.

As profits rose, they added to their workforce, which peaked at 35. Still, Davis remained highly hands-on, managing production and staff as well as designing. "I was very, very naïve going into the business. I didn't know what I was getting into. Even though I had all these dreams and ambitions, I didn't know it was going to take off like it did."

Disaster struck in 2000. When imported European yarns arrived late for the key winter season, production was delayed and most orders were cancelled. Crawford and Davis were forced to close one factory, but slowly built back credibility and paid off debts.

Realising the company was getting unsustainably big, they restructured late in 2000 — slashing marketing, closing their Newmarket shop, and ditching their high-end range, Insidious, to concentrate on the "second-tier" range, Fix. By 2004 the label's annual turnover had risen to \$1.5 million.

2004 and 2005 were big years. Davis and Crawford used 2004's Air NZ Export Development Award to trip around London and LA, determining how to propel their label into those markets. That year, Insidious Fix also launched a sophisticated women's line, "Esoteric", and was chosen to star in a city-hopping exhibition of "youth-inspiring" companies, The New Cool.

But she never felt entirely secure. "I think that's part and parcel of running your own business. I remember when we sold the very first Insidious range to Chris Cherry from Workshop, he said, 'You just get over one hurdle and then there's another one'. That really stuck in my mind."

Then the police came knocking.

Davis won't comment on how her finances fared after Insidious Fix shut up shop, as the company is still going through liquidation, but she can't be too hard up. She pulls up in a flash black Fiat with the numberplate FIX to her home in Mangere Bridge, a quiet Manukau Harbour peninsula quickly coming to the attention of Auckland house hunters. Davis and Rankin bought the property three years ago because they loved its location: the harbour's only a street away and it's less than 10 minutes' drive to work and 15 to 20 minutes' into the city.

Secreted behind a tall, wooden fence with overhanging foliage is their "old 60s shoebox". The house is tidy but not scrupulously so, filled with knick-knacks: abstract art, ornaments, flower installations and books. In the well-kept garden a swing waits for toddler attention.

Davis is "loving being a mum", even with that makes-you-feel-tired-just-thinking-about-it schedule. "I'm still getting my head around how it all works, learning and trying to establish a routine. I've got huge support to fit in as much as I do."

Both her parents live in Manukau, within 10 minutes' drive of their daughter's home, and often babysit. Gloria requisitions Friday nights with Munro so her daughter can have a break — "whether that's going out or just sleeping in". In summer Davis and Rankin like to kayak across the harbour.

"There are big differences between Mat and me but I like to think we balance each other out. He's very spiritual, holistic, natural-living, non-materialistic, not really career-driven — and I'm

Davis and four-month-old Munro.





Kylee and brother Sean, 1995. She helped found the Sweet Child Of Mine Trust, to help disadvantaged or at-risk youth, in his memory.

materialistic, career-oriented and non-spiritual,” she laughs.

“He explores all his emotions right away, releases it and it’s all done vooom. I don’t. If I can avoid exploring my feelings I probably do. I distract myself.”

She pre-empts the next question.

“I probably haven’t dealt with losing my business at all. It’s taken me a long time to feel all the feelings about it.

“We’ve all got shit in our lives. If you try to work on that stuff when it’s happening or whenever you can, you’re probably going to have a more positive life for it, rather than end up in a place where you don’t want to be.”

The memory of big brother Sean is a perpetual reminder to Davis to make the most of her lot in life.

A friendly, family-oriented guy who worked as a bricklayer and loved old British motorbikes — he meticulously rebuilt dozens and owned four — Sean developed schizophrenia in his early 20s.

“We lost our brother when he became schizophrenic. All our common ground was wiped out — the drugs they used to treat it changed his whole personality.”

Extremely paranoid, Sean didn’t like to stay in one place for too long. “He lived on the streets for a long time, went in and out of halfway houses, he couldn’t hold down a job or have a relationship. It was really difficult for me — for all the family — going for long periods without seeing him, wondering what he was doing or where he was or how he was going.”

Sean killed himself in 2003, aged 39. It wasn’t a huge shock to his little sister. “It was what he needed to do and it was about him and it wasn’t about me, the family or anyone else. I felt like I really understood that. He was such an intelligent guy and he’d battled with schizophrenia for so many years. I saw him just a month or so before it happened and he seemed the most at peace with himself he’d been in years. In a way I feel like he’s found peace finally.”

Resolving not to dwell on the loss of her brother, Davis decided

to try to make a difference to other lives. In 2005 at the launch of The New Cool exhibition, she met Steve Hodge, founding partner of the streetwear label Illicit, and discovered he too had lost someone close to suicide. They decided to jointly set up the Sweet Child Of Mine Trust to fund creative-industry internships for disadvantaged or at-risk youth. The \$5000 from t-shirts sold at the exhibition were the first drop in the bucket and — now that Davis is back in business — will be followed by proceeds from a designated t-shirt in future Stitch Ministry and Illicit collections.

Gloria can’t think of a better way to honour her son.

“It’s typical of Kylee to get in there and do it and make sure it carries on even without Insidious. I’m lucky with my daughter. She’s calm, straight-up, doesn’t panic, scream or yell — not a performing seal like some designers. She handled herself with such dignity after the Jason scandal. Jason was like a son to me, so I was more disappointed than angry. It was such a shock, and left Kylee with such a mess.”

After Christmas at home, Davis, Rankin and little Munro joined friends camping for five days at Whangateau, an hour’s drive north of Auckland.

It was her first “decent break” in more than two years. “It’s been a hard, challenging year and a half. But in a way it’s been almost worth going through what I have to feel all the support around me. When people heard about the drug bust then the [knitting machine] accident, they obviously felt for me to some degree. Friends, family, colleagues, associates all stepped in to help; even rival company heads rang and offered help. It was amazing because you don’t usually get to see stuff like that. I felt quite blessed.”

While she doesn’t see much of Crawford now “for obvious reasons”, they’ve had to meet to discuss dissolving the business and tying up other loose ends. She won’t discuss those conversations except to say he’s apologised time and again for what she’s been through.

Did she accept his apology? A long, long pause. “I don’t know, actually. It’s still something I’m still getting over — my whole life changed because of it. In a way it was like coming out of a divorce. There’s likely still some dark clouds to dodge. But I know I can take it from here.” ■

