

## **New Owner for Neil's Apparel**

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**Neil's Apparel**, a longtime fixture on Palm Desert, Calif.'s tony El Paseo Drive, has changed hands for the first time in its history. Businesswoman Karen Billings recently purchased the 36-year-old boutique for an undisclosed sum.

The store had been owned and operated by Meg Firestone, daughter of the original owner, Neil McElrath, who passed away a few years ago. Firestone sold the store to concentrate on running the adjacent **J. Russell Salon & Spa**, which also has been one of the family's longtime holdings. McElrath, a former **Bullock's** buyer, opened the store in 1972, being one of the few at the time to envision the potential for Palm Desert. He carried primarily one line, **Da-Rue of California Inc.**, which he later acquired. McElrath's surviving family members are still principals in the Los Angeles-based company.

Since taking over, Billings has augmented the store's product line with updated and contemporary labels such as **Alberto Makali**, **Hippie Ink**, **Harari**, **Margaret M.** and others. The store still sells Da-Rue and German label **Lucia**.

Billings said the tweaking of lines and the winter tourism in the desert have kept business strong. The store also participated in the recent **Palm Desert Fashion Week**.

"El Paseo has a season, and the economy hasn't affected it as much out here," said Billings, who has the distinction of being a former **Little Miss Sunbeam** model for the baked-goods company. —*Robert McAllister*