

FRONT LINES

IN STORE/Metropolitan Optical

A Retailer Sees Green on Capitol Hill

BY DELIA PAUNESCU / ASSISTANT EDITOR

WASHINGTON D.C.—At the height of the past decade’s “going green” movement, Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” won an Academy Award and canvas totes proclaiming “I’m not a plastic bag” took over grocery lines. But while companies and consumers alike were wearing their green initiatives on their sleeves, an optical practice in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood here became a friend to the environment without a lot of fuss.

The 19-year-old Metropolitan Optical decided to move to a corner space with window displays and street traffic in October 2009. In renovating the new location, incorporating LEED certified lighting, cork flooring and recycled carpeting squares wasn’t just a marketing gimmick. “Upon making the decision to relocate, I knew it was important to do our part to help improve the environment, especially as a D.C.-based business because the green-push is so important in our market,” said owner Saba Ayalew, OD. But news

of her office’s green efforts didn’t even make it into advertising for the new location.

In renovating, Ayalew said she wanted a rather contemporary feel and worked with Blanca Rivera at Eye Designs to achieve “something customer-friendly, open and comfortable.” Ayalew credits Rivera for helping her think long-term about lighting that would be complimentary to frames while reducing energy costs.

“A lot of people weren’t thinking of that a year ago but it’s so critical. If you’re going to do it right, you need to evolve and challenge yourself,” Ayalew said. As a result, the business has also noticed some energy savings. “We went with environmentally friendly lighting fixtures and bulbs so the combination has reduced our overall expenses by about 35 percent.” Ayalew added, “It is a bit of an investment initially but it pays off in the end.”

Emphasis was also placed on comfort. The new Metropolitan Optical location makes good use of wall space while incorporating a few free-



Metropolitan Optical owner Saba Ayalew, OD.

standing fixtures (all outfitted with energy-efficient fluorescent bulbs). The color palette is contemporary with blues and grays complementing a sage green column. The majority of the 1,600-square-foot space is devoted to the optical boutique—there are also two exam rooms, one back office, and a “relatively small” lab. Already offering frames from brands like Alain Mikli, Kawasaki, Gucci, Armani, Oliver Peoples and Porsche Design, Metropolitan Optical has recently incorporated the eco eyewear line from Modo featuring frames which are made from mostly recycled materials.

“D.C. is a very socially conscious market and many of the residents here care deeply about the efforts that we’re all making—both as residents and as business owners. So they look for products [even fashion items] that fall with-

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Free-standing frame displays greet pedestrians on a corner of D.C.’s Foggy Bottom neighborhood.



The new Metropolitan Optical location, complete with flooring made from cork and recycled carpet squares.



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Friending the Environment

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in that realm,” said marketing coordinator Shawn Gatewood regarding their decision to add Eco.

To promote their latest eyewear addition, Metropolitan Optical is also hosting a trunk show on Earth Day, April 22. “It’s a nod to Earth Day on a very specific level,” Ayalew said. “We’re trying to promote sustainability so we’re letting customers know, ‘Here are frames that are 90 percent post-consumer waste.’”

In a continuing commitment to the environment, Ayalew wants her practice to bring iPads into the waiting room so patients can fill out paperwork electronically. “We’ve had a paperless initiative since 2002 but right now it’s more ‘paper-reduced’ because we still have patients fill out the paperwork and then we shred it.” She is

currently working on a PDF that patients would pre-send “so we already have the information before they walk in” and is also reaching out to manufacturers of contact solution regarding the amount of packaging used in their samples.

Despite all her efforts, Ayalew believes that her practice isn’t green “in an overt way. I think of it as a combination of inter-marketing, PR and branding beyond anything to do with eyes. We care about the environment more than just on an individual level and we’re trying to make that a statement about who we are,” she explained. ■

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Each frame display is LEED certified with energy efficient light bulbs to ensure that Metropolitan Optical conserves as much electricity as possible.



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