

## WALKING ON ART

BUCKETFEET FOUNDERS **RAAJA NEMANI** AND **AARON FIRESTEIN** SHARE ARTISTS' STORIES WITH THE WORLD VIA THEIR COLLABORATIVELY MADE, CUSTOM-DESIGNED SHOES. **BY DAWN REISS**



Raaja Nemani and Aaron Firestein have launched a footwear line designed to stand out, inspire conversation, and connect people through art.

Lounging in his West Loop office, Raaja Nemani is the picture of casual cool: a backward baseball cap, V-neck T-shirt, and half-buttoned plaid shirt. He's a former investment banker and private equity investor who once worked in Abu Dhabi, but he doesn't look the part. Laughs Nemani, "When people see me, they don't believe I have a business background."

Looks can be deceiving. Nemani and colleague Aaron Firestein are the cofounders of BucketFeet, a Chicago-based company that specializes in artist-designed footwear and wall art that can be printed on demand—and they have proved any disbelievers wrong. In three years, the dynamic duo has taken the start-up into retailers in more than 20 countries, including Nordstrom and multiple brick-and-mortar stores, with skyrocketing online sales to boot. "This is the most 'jobby' job I've ever had," jokes Firestein, a California native who sports a hipster beard and wears BucketFeet's signature slip-on shoes with the Pineappleade print—a half pineapple, half grenade pattern designed by Colombian artist DJ Lu.

### **INSIGHT:**

**Gold Coast living:** "I love being near the water to go for runs and channel Tony Hawk with my long board." —AF

**Hoop dreams:** "I'm a huge Bulls fan. As a little kid, it was very easy to fall in love with Michael Jordan." —RN

This year, BucketFeet teamed with Lollapalooza to create the music festival's first official shoe and just added a mid-top sneaker to its line. "A year and a half ago, it was only two of us; today it's 20," says Nemani, who acts as the company's CEO. "We're probably going to double in the next six months. We'd love to be one of the biggest brands in the world."

The pair met while volunteering in Argentina and eventually moved to Chicago to create the company, which they launched in 2011. When they started out, Firestein took a bag full of shoes and drove across the US multiple times, making cold calls at shoe stores and visiting street fairs, music festivals, and "anywhere we could sell even one pair of shoes," says Nemani. "Aaron and I are both hustlers. We will do whatever it takes to get anything done."

Initially, Firestein personally invited artists to work for the brand. These days, with more than 150 artists who have designed shoes and over 5,000 artists in their network, Firestein reviews online submissions with a committee. "Choosing whose shoes get made and whose don't is always a difficult process," he says. "These are all passionate, creative people with unique stories to tell." Available at *Block Thirty Seven, 108 N. State St., 312-631-3201; bucketfeet.com* **MA**