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Style

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Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Power lunch: Tyler Mitchell (from left), whose family acquired the Wilkes Bashford shops in San Francisco and Palo Alto, lunches with Le Central regulars Harry de Wildt, former Mayor Willie Brown and Wilkes Bashford in San Francisco.

A DAY IN THE LIFE *Of Tyler Mitchell*

Stepping up to the fashion plate in S.F.

By **Carolyn Zinko**
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

How does a 31-year-old former Boston College soccer player step in as manager at Wilkes Bashford, the luxury clothing store that the 77-year-old owner has built into a San Francisco institution during the past four decades? Seamlessly, it appears.

Tyler Mitchell is from the family that bought Bashford's Sutter Street and Palo Alto boutiques last year to stave off closure in the bum economy. Mitchells Richards Marshs, the Connecticut chain founded by Tyler's uncle, Jack Mitchell, has infused cash and energy into the new acquisitions, and the results are promising. Tyler, who has worked for Australia's IMG, Canada's Harry Rosen stores and Brioni, is melding the stores' cultures — and bringing Bashford's pen-and-ink operations into the computer age. Five months into the job, here's what he's up to.

7:30 a.m. Tyler leaves his condo at the Ritz-Carlton residences on Market Street for a twice-weekly 4-mile run on the Embarcadero with his cousin, Andrew Mitchell-Namdar, a marathoner and the chain's marketing manager.

They talk shop — reviewing recommendations by the Forum Group, whose members are luxury retailers who meet twice a year to exchange information on fashion trends and

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Talking shop: Mitchell, manager of the San Francisco shop, and Bashford take a stroll.

Stepping up to the plate of S.F. clothing institution

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share strategies. The group recently visited the stores and recommended opening long-shuttered windows on every floor of the Sutter Street store to allow daylight and views. (It's a priority in major renovations to come.)

Both men are stunned by the waterfront's beauty and May's balmy weather. They've learned customers don't need heavy knits and coats, which is messing up their big-picture ordering plans.

9:45 a.m. Tyler and Andrew lead a staff meeting, with Bashford and Jack Mitchell (Andrew's father) nearby. They focus on new trunk shows and products designed to get customers — who left when inventory stagnated last year — back in the door. Fresh items include playful underwear for \$36 and jewelry for less than \$500, for the customer who can't casually drop \$10,000 on a suit.

First talking point: custom Hamilton men's shirts. They arrive at lightning speed — three weeks (faster than other vendors) — and start at \$295, a "bargain" here.

"As beautiful as a dress is, if it's not in the customer's size, you can't sell it."

Tyler Mitchell

"You try a custom shirt and you can never go back," Andrew tells the staff. "And it creates loyalty with a customer, a bond. Back East, when the guy gets a shirt, he likes it and comes back for 10, 20, 30 shirts."

10 a.m. The store opens. Tyler, sifting through e-mail, says that within a month of the acquisition, new computer systems were installed to replace paper ledgers in which customers' purchases, preferences and birthday information had been penned by hand.

11 a.m. Tyler and Andrew visit with New York designer Behnaz Sarafpour, who has arrived for her womenswear trunk show, co-hosted by San Francisco first lady Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Waiters proffer Champagne and offer catered hors d'oeuvres to shoppers. Her customer, she says, is a woman who "wants classic, but different, in luxurious fabrics." Her idea of San Francisco style is "chic, but relaxed, not as formal as New York or as glitzy as L.A. ... A fall collection is perfect here all year." A black lacy dress with a metal zipper runs \$1,975; a nubby "popcorn" sweater is \$825; a wool faille trench coat is \$1,800.

11:35 a.m. Tyler and Andrew are at the store's first-floor cocktail bar not drinking

but poring over their laptops, talking about inventory management ("As beautiful as a dress is, if it's not in the customer's size, you can't sell it," Tyler says) and the new, glossy Wilkes Bashford magazine, which they'll mail customers twice a year.

Noon. Michael Polenske, owner of Blackbird Vineyards, stops in to brainstorm about special events. Clothier Kiton once sent its house chef from Italy to make dinner for the Mitchells' Connecticut customers. "If we could do that in Napa ..." Tyler muses. Polenske has ideas for such a dinner, a wine cellar photo shoot and a Wilkes Bashford wine label.

12:45 p.m. Bashford is in his seventh-floor office, his dachshund, Duchy, and Jazzy, Tyler's 12-year-old Jack Russell terrier, by his side.

"I'm so happy the way things are moving forward," Bashford says, looking sunnier than he has in months. "Even if the economy hadn't created the difficulty it did, this would have been a great partnership."

1:35 p.m. Tyler joins Bashford, former Mayor Willie Brown and arts patron Harry de Wildt at Le Central, where the older men have held Friday power lunches for 32 years (along with Chronicle columnist Herb Caen, who died in 1997). Restaurant owner Paul Tanphanich presents Tyler with a gift: his own monogrammed shaker for boss dice, a game similar to poker played with dice.

3:15 p.m. As lunch nears the two-hour mark, thanks to a parade of patrons paying homage to the table's occupants, Tyler looks at his watch, intent on getting back to work. But boss dice begins; he gives in. "Roll it more aggressively than that!" Bashford shouts to Tyler, who promptly rolls a full house and wins the pot. "You keep doing that," says Bashford, "and you won't be invited back!"

3:30 p.m. Tyler leaves his lunch mates behind to keep an appointment selling jackets to a tech investor named Geoff, one of his brother's college chums. Behind his back, the staff has much to say — all good. "Nothing is above the Mitchells," says saleswoman Lotta Velger. "If I'm busy, I'll say, 'Tyler, can you wrap this gift' or 'Tyler, can you take this to FedEx?' You can't buy that."

5:10: Back at the bar, Tyler analyzes sales on his laptop. "We're having a good day," he says. "We're beating plan. Robert had a huge sale in Palo Alto. And Geoff will be coming back. He's rocking only one suit right now." Richard



Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Womenswear: Designer Behnaz Sarafpour, in town for her womenswear trunk show at the shop, and Mitchell discuss her designs. San Francisco style, she says, is "chic, but relaxed."



Dicey proposition: Le Central owner Paul Tanphanich (from left) and waiter Louis Parnell present Mitchell a monogrammed dice shaker.



Family ties: Mitchell confers with his uncle, Jack Mitchell, founder of the family's retail chain in Connecticut who acquired the Bashford shops.

Horn, CEO of Shreve & Co. jewelers, stops by with his pet Apricot poodle, Jasper, to visit, as does customer Donna Blatman, with her Labrador. "It's very social here," she said. Her husband, Peter, likes the energy the Mitchells have infused. "It has been a logical and great extension, a great merger," he says.

6 p.m.: An hour before dinner, Tyler's in his office. Across the hall, his uncle, Jack, who's in the store two weeks a month, is working with Jeff Garelick to build the store's sales culture. It includes helping customers with closet clean-outs and wardrobe-building, as well as sales-floor techniques. "Tyler?" shouts Jack. "Where's dinner tonight with Behnaz?" "Farina!" Tyler shouts back. "Where?" Jack asks. "Don't worry, I'll lead you," Tyler replies. "Good," says Jack. "I need to be led."

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On the move: Mitchell (left) and cousin Andrew Mitchell-Namdar start the day with a 4-mile run.