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From Concept to Design

The road to becoming a fashion designer.

by Bree Shirvell

Love to watch Bravo's Project Runway? Find yourself doodling ideas for outfits on what was supposed to be your math assignment? Maybe you find yourself recycling last season's clothes by changing that stained dress into a skirt, or you visit the mall just to go home and create a pretty purse you saw.

You may have even thought to yourself "Hey, I could be a fashion designer." But transforming the quick sketch into a portfolio, or the idea into a proposal, can seem like a daunting task. Rather than worry, however, follow those instincts and continue to doodle and dream. It can help you succeed in the fashion industry.

The truth is, many of today's top fashion designers started out just like you— by making drawings and playing around on the family sewing machine.

Don't be fooled, though; pursuing a career in fashion design is challenging. By most estimates, there are only 16,000 people who are employed as fashion designers in the United States, making competition for employment steep. Most fashion design jobs are located in New York City and Los Angeles, and the majority of fashion designers are self-employed. Separating yourself from everyone else means dedication in pursuing your interests.

So, where does an aspiring fashion designer start? Well, remember those doodles on your math homework, save all of them! Except maybe start drawing on something besides your homework. Fashion sketches are your first step to having your own portfolio. Many high schools offer classes in basic fashion design and jewelry design. If yours doesn't, taking any type of drawing or art classes, along with entrepreneurial classes, to give you an idea of the skills needed to create designs as well as manage your own business.

There are also fashion-related summer camps. The site MySummerCamps.com allows users to search for fashion design camps by age, location, price and duration. At such fashion-related summer camps, you can continue developing a portfolio, learn more about the different aspects of fashion design and meet other students who are as passionate about fashion design as you are.

After taking those classes and spending time at a fashion-based summer camp, the next step is to apply to colleges for fashion and design. There are two ways to explore colleges. One way is to research schools that focus on fashion design, such as The Art Institute of Atlanta and The Art Institute of California. Another way is to look at liberal arts colleges with strong art programs that would also allow you to take a wide range of classes— just in case you decide fashion design isn't for you. It's a good idea to look at schools in New York City and Los Angeles, as those are cities where you'll probably live as a fashion designer after school. Looking at schools in those areas also enables you to have fashion-related internships during school in order to gain work experience and start making contacts that could lead to potential employment after school.

Pursuing a career in fashion design presents challenges. But, those who become fashion designers are assured work environments that are creative and constantly changing.

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