

DESIGNING KIDS HAPPILY REAPING WHAT THEY SEW



Top right, Nicole Dash, 12, of Springfield models the dress she made at the Kids Summer Camp at Fabricland in North Plainfield, as Julie Roe, 12, of Basking Ridge checks it out. Above, teacher Chris Gonch works with Caitlin Doherty, 12, of Middlesex and Christian Wallace, 12, of Green Brook at the camp.

'Project Runway' sparks passion for homemade fashion

BY VICKI NYMAN
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On "Project Runway," aspiring designers rip into silk, satin and chiffon — and increasingly, each other — while fashion mentor Tim Gunn wanders through the studio offering arch observations on their works-in-progress, such as this recent winner: "It looks like a pterodactyl out of a gay Jurassic Park."

A surprising number of school kids are tuning in to the reality TV series — as homework.

The Bravo hit is helping to turn a legion of teens and even grade-schoolers into budding Balenciagas, Bedding von Fustenbergers or maybe even a nascent Narciso Rodriguez, the Newark native who worked for Anne Klein, Donna Karan and Calvin Klein before launching his own successful line a decade ago.

Or maybe they just want to pull a "Pretty in Pink" and dash off their own dream prom dress.

Used to be, girls wouldn't be caught dead wearing homespun frocks, and sure enough, many mothers today never learned to sew beyond rudimentary pillows or possibly a wonky-hemmed skirt in a junior high "home ec" class.

Now teenagers are swarming sewing classes offered by local fabric shops, signing up for fashion merchandising and design courses at vo-tech schools or working with private instructors, and even giving home economics — er, family and consumer science — a second look.

"The moms don't know how to do it," says Patricia DiGirola-Laird, a family and consumer science teacher at J.P. Stevens High School in Edison, which offers at least five sewing classes, up from just one a few years ago.

"When their kids do something, they're in awe of it. At home, it's 'Oh, look what my



Gonch watches as Caitlin uses a serger to cut, finish and sew her dress. Tweens and teens are flocking to sewing classes at fabric shops and fashion courses at vo-tech schools.

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by Rachel Weston on nj.com
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daughter did." One of my students, she says, "Every time company comes to the house, my mother takes everything out of the closet that I made and does a fashion show of it."

Leighann Laurencelle, a 13-year-old from Bridgewater, takes classes at Fabricland in North Plainfield, where her Mandarin-inspired jacket and cropped pants won the store's own version of "Project Runway" earlier this year.

"Seeing the show made me want to do it more," Leighann says.

But the show also makes her think she might not be cut out for it as a career. "I realized how cutthroat the business is," she says.

Project Runway is structured around New York Fashion Week and culminates Friday when its finalists unveil their own collections under the tents in Bryant Park; the finale airs in October.

When Nancy Flominski took over the sewing program at Fabricland in November 2005, the store was down to just a few classes. Now the store offers about 50 classes a month for all ages.

For the last decade, Jennifer Sletold has been teaching college-level pattern-making and garment construction classes at her Springfield-based New Jersey School of Fashion Design and Accessories for youngsters who are serious about pursuing careers in fashion. Some of her students are still in grade school — "If Salvatore Ferragamo

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SCOTT LITUCHY/THE STAR-LEDGER

Caitlin Doherty looks pleased with the dress she made at Fabricland in North Plainfield, which holds its own version of "Project Runway."

SEWING

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Finding a passion for fashion

started at 9," Siletski says, "why can't my kids do it?" — and she'll mentor them and help them develop portfolios for top-flight schools like Parsons and the Fashion Institute of Technology.

"They all watch 'Project Runway,'" Siletski says. "They're stimulated by it, but they also understand there's hard work that goes along with it. The end results can be exciting, but in the end, they have to have a background in sewing and pattern-making or you can't put together something in 24 hours."

Julia Pallone, 10, of New Vernon giggles at some of the looks sent down the show's runway.

"Some of the clothes are really crazy," she says.

Julia's mother, Beth, comes from a family of seamstresses and believes the skills her daughter is learning will help her no matter what she wants to do with her life.

"It's a lot of problem-solving," she says. "It's one thing to follow a pattern, but they were con-

structing something from scratch ... How do you get from the concept to the finished product? This is a real-life application."

DiGirola-Laird says "Project Runway" has helped boost interest in sewing and fashion design, but the trend toward creative handi-crafts was already building.

Her theory: Kids today are craving a tangible sense of accomplishment that they don't get from texting or playing around on the computer. "I think it does build their self-esteem when they make something," she says. (In that case, Julia Pallone is exhibit A: "At the end of the project," she says, "it's fun to see that you finished something.")

Edwina Williams, a fashion merchandising and design instructor at Ocean County Vocational Technical School in Brick, occasionally brings in taped episodes of "Project Runway" to show in class.

"The challenges that deal with teamwork are always good because it shows these students the importance of being able to work together to resolve a problem," Williams says. "You have to kind of give and take; you have to make compromises sometimes for the sake of having the project work."

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