

Ready for the RUNWAY

by Daryl Brower

At Fabricland in North Plainfield, New Jersey, learning to sew is definitely "in." For the past three years the store has been running a creative class for kids ages 10 to 18, teaching them the basics of sewing and design by way of a *Project Runway*-inspired fashion challenge. Dubbed Project Fabricland, the 12-week course kicks off much the same as its TV counterpart with the unveiling of a sewing challenge (last year's theme was "make it retro," this year it's "make it picturesque"). Then with the help of instructors, the kids pick a pattern, shop for fabrics, sketch and swatch their design ideas and then spend the remaining weeks of the session constructing their garments in Fabricland's state-of-the-art sewing studio. The class culminates in a full-scale fashion show, where the kids take to the runway, modeling their garments for both judges and an audience of appreciative fashion fans. *Vogue Patterns* own editor-in-chief, Kathy Marrone, had the pleasure of serving as a judge for the 2009 competition and was blown away by what she saw. "What these kids pulled together is really incredible," she says. "There was a lot of skill and thought put into what they presented on the runway."

Thirty kids participated in last year's Project Fabricland and school director Nancy Plominski, who runs the program, says she's equally impressed by her students' enthusiasm and the skills they bring to the sewing room. "They're so excited to sit here and sew for two and a half hours straight," she says. "It's fantastic. I literally have to kick them out of the studio at the end of class." While a basic sewing background is required to participate in Project Fabricland, most of the students are beginning sewers—not that their novice skills hinder their creativity. "A lot of them adapt the pattern to their own vision," says Plominski. "We show them how to do it but the ideas are their own."



And the first prize winners are... (left to right) Charley Randall, with her model Morgan Hernandez. Charley won in the 10-12 age group, special guest Kenley Collins, Cara Benevenia, winner in the 13-14 age group, and Brielle McCormick, winner in the 15-17 age group.



The class may end with a competition (projects are judged on design, construction technique and wearability), but scissors are the only things snipping in the Fabricland workshop. Unlike their sometimes-catty counterparts on *Project Runway*, these budding designers seem to genuinely enjoy working together and are quick to compliment and help out their fellow designers. "They really enjoy being with each other and are always tossing out compliments," says Plominski. "It's all very positive." Tension can build as it gets closer to show time, though. "It kills them to think they won't be finished in time for the show," says Plominski. "So we're a little more forgiving with the time requirements." To make sure everyone's garment is finished in time, Plominski allows any student who wants to stay in the studio until closing time on the two Sundays leading up to the show. "They're so dedicated to getting everything just right," she explains. "And we want to encourage that." Upping the excitement on show day are surprise visits from contestants from *Project Runway*. Kenley Collins, a finalist in Season 5 showed up in 2009, the year before Kevin Christiana from Season 4 was the special guest. (No word yet on who'll show up this year.)

Plominski is pretty certain that her students have a good chance of following in the footsteps of their Runway heroes. "What's great about this program is that the kids really get to understand the whole design process from start to finish," she says. "They learn exactly what it takes to turn a fashion vision into reality." Fueled by a love of fashion and a solid sewing background, you just might see them on the real world runways in the future.

Project Fabricland's next session starts up January 21, 2010; the fashion show will be held on May 1st. Information about sign up and tickets can be found at www.fabricland.com or call (908) 755-4700. All proceeds from ticket sales benefit the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of NJ.

The participants in the 2009 Project Fabricland competition take to the stage to show off their original design and sewing skills. They all deserve a big round of applause.

