

show stoppers

by Daryl Brower

With a Project Runway-style competition, one New Jersey fabric store is helping teens and 'tweens discover that sewing is definitely "in."

Walk into the sewing studio at Fabricland in North Plainfield, New Jersey, and you may be surprised by the age—and skill—of the bodies seated at the sewing machines. Education is big at this store and much of it is focused on the 18 and under set. The class roster is packed with everything from basic sewing to advanced pattern drafting—plus everything in between.

But the one session that arguably creates the most excitement is Project Fabricland, a 12-week course that kicks off much the same manner as the reality TV show that inspired it. Like their counterparts on reality TV, the fashion savvy kids who sign up for the course start the session with the unveiling of a sewing challenge. "This year's challenge was Make It Picturesque," says school director and Project Fabricland organizer Nancy Plominski. "They had to develop a design based on a favorite piece of art." The contestants in this particular contest don't have to create a design from scratch, but they do need to find a way to modify or personalize an existing pattern to suite the theme of the challenge. With the help of instructors they sketch up ideas, swatch fabrics and create a storyboard for their designs. The remaining weeks of the session are dedicated to constructing the garments. The program 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.

Many participants of Project Fabricland—including 2010's Best in Show winner, 18-year-old Amanda Friedman (1), have been with the program from the beginning. "It's just so great to see them keep coming back year after year," says Plominski. "We get to watch them grow up both in age and in skill. It's just fabulous." Plominski says that what most impresses her about the kids who participate is their fearlessness—they're willing to try just about anything. "They have a great sense of design and they know what they want to do," she says. "They set really high goals for themselves and they meet them."

That fearlessness was evident in Friedman's winning design—an empire-waist silk gown that she painted by hand. Friedman, an art student who will be studying design at the Pratt Institute in New York this year, had never attempted fabric painting before but that didn't faze her. "I just sort of knew it would work," she says. "And I'm really happy with the way it worked out." She should be. Her dress, which she also wore to her prom, wowed all of the judges,

including *Vogue Patterns* editor-in-chief Kathy Marrone. "It was just gorgeous," she says of Friedman's design. "The colors, the technique—it's amazing to see someone so young turning out such a fabulous project." Marrone was equally impressed by the other budding designers who made their way down the runway. "It was really hard to choose the winners," she says. "Everything was so well done."

The kids participating are equally complementary of each other. "It's great to watch how they encourage and help each other during class," says Plominski. And though there's none of the cattiness and back biting that takes place on the TV show, the kids who come out do want to win. And why not? Aside from the thrill of having their talents recognized in front of an audience, the participants have the chance to win scholarship money and a state of the art sewing machine. But prizes aren't the only perk. Friedman says she thrives on the competition, both with her classmates and herself. "I've done this every year, and every year I want to make something more challenging, she says. "I love having something that's totally different from what everyone else is wearing." Samantha Squeri (2), winner in the 14-year-old category, has a similar take. "It's just so cool to be able to say you made what you're wearing," she says. Eleven-year-old Margaux Natiello (3), winner of the 10- to 13-year-old category finds satisfaction in the whole sewing process. "I just love watching how something I make develops," she says. "It's so much fun to see it coming off the machine and watching the fabric turn into something special." Grace Entwistle 15, (4), winner in the 15- to 18-year-old division, says that despite the competition she finds sewing incredibly relaxing. "If I've had a bad day at school or I'm stressed, it feels great to come to class and sew," she says. "Making things makes me feel good."

Information about sign up and tickets can be found at www.fabricland.com or call (908) 755-4700. <

