



Fashionable faculty (from left to right): Jessica Frantal, Sarah Eichorn and Ashley Brooks

Creating Fashion's Future

Design veterans turn out the Midwest's aspiring couture stars right here in MKE.

BY JENNA KASHOU | PHOTOS BY DAVID SZYMANSKI

Where does one begin if she dreams of working in the rapidly changing, highly competitive fashion industry?

In the Midwest, the answer might be surprising: A Catholic women's university with fewer than 1,000 students.

Mount Mary University is committed to ensuring that its students have the same access and opportunities as fashion design students around the globe.

Founded by the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), Mount Mary offered the first four-year fashion design and merchandise management program in the nation. Sister Aloyse Hessburg, SSND, started the program in 1965, which has grown steadily to 90 students, split evenly between the two tracks. Mount Mary also offers a graduate certificate program for women pursuing a second degree. There are no more than 15 students in a class at one time, which allows for hands-on instruction and personal attention. A majority of students come from the Milwaukee area with the intent to stay in the Midwest.

There are four full-time faculty members — all of whom have a background in the industry with prominent brands such as Harley-Davidson, Kohl's, Jockey and Lands' End. Ashley Brooks spent 11 years with Kohl's

and another six at VF Corporation in her home state of North Carolina before landing at Mount Mary as instructor and department chair two years ago. She brings this real-world experience into the classroom to prepare students for their careers in fashion.

Most students take the corporate route in either merchandising or design, creating their own work on the side. Others work as entrepreneurs right out of school, creating collections to show at Milwaukee Fashion Week or with groups like the Milwaukee Fashion Initiative which offer support for designers as they build their own businesses. The fashion design major is geared toward students with a passion for art and apparel construction and a strong interest in the process of creating.

"Fashion design is complicated," says designer and Executive Fellow Donna Ricco, a Milwaukee native and Mount Mary alumna, who joined the school's staff last year to work on behalf of the university both in Milwaukee and New York, expanding its industry connections and community involvement. "Studying the hands-on elements and qualities of fashion, and the tactile element of fabric and the way clothing fits, is the most powerful education for future designers of any capacity."

Ricco calls the merchandise management side equally important because it teaches students how trends drive retail sales, the global supply chain, store planning and visual merchandising and brand management.

Small Market, Big Opportunity

Can studying in a city not known for fashion actually benefit students?

For Alicia Johnson, the opportunity to have time, space and support to discover and develop her skills is priceless. "Other programs in larger cities are really competitive. You have to already be a really good designer to get in," she says.

Johnson grew up in Waukesha and attended Mount Mary's fashion-centered summer camps as a kid. It wasn't until after she received an associate's degree in business that she realized that she wanted to pursue a career in fashion to fill her creative void. She found her niche in the process of design — from concept and research, to pattern making and prototyping — and will graduate in May, pursuing a career in technical design here in Milwaukee.

Assistant professor Sarah Eichorn says her students bring a Midwestern work ethic, putting in long hours in the classroom and also working jobs outside of the classroom. "They are driven by their passions and are hoping to succeed in the fashion industry," she says.

More than 20 percent of Mount Mary students also take advantage of travel opportunities to New York City or Paris for a behind-the-scenes look at the fashion industry. "Students are trained to look everywhere for inspiration and utilize certain databases to review trends from around the globe, giving them access to the same trend services that designers in the industry use," says Brooks. "But I see our students being influenced by experiences more than where they are living and studying. For example, they want to design clothing for a working woman who is also social in the evening, wearing only one outfit for the entire day."

Show And Sell

The culmination of all arts and design majors (including interior and graphic designers) is the CREO Fashion Show, which allows seniors to showcase their original work. Students plan and produce every aspect of the professional-caliber fashion show, using student models as well. This year's 51st annual event is on May 10 at Mount Mary; over 1,000 guests are expected to attend.

"I doubt anyone comes to our fashion show and thinks, 'This is obviously Milwaukee,'" Brooks says with pride. "Being located in the Midwest no longer implies that our students are isolated or out of touch with what's happening in the fashion capitals. Their inspirations are global and they are influenced by what's happening culturally." MKE