

FASHIONNEXT

Crowned in Garnet interviews Andrea Reynders

As a fashion expert, what/who inspired you to do fashion?

When I was a high school student, in an all girl's school in Chicago, I worked for a portrait photographer and his wife, both who graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. They were very modern and introduced me to good design, in architecture, objects and fashion. It was a very contemporary time, when everyone wanted the latest modern influences from music, space exploration, art, fashion, hair, cars, etc. My decision to attend SAIC and then be inspired by my teachers was a turning point in my life. While I was actually in the fashion scene in Chicago I felt I wanted to know more, be more. I began to take additional classes in school in a department called Environmental Design—which changed my life. Here I learned how integrated all aspects of design are—fashion, photography, film, performance, sound . . .and I expanded my direction to include all these going forward.

At the same time there was a movement in Paris happening with a group of young fashion designers that inspired me. Issey Myake, Kenzo, Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, among others. I began to go to Paris and see the shows and got to know some of the designers. Because I loved garment, I thought I would always be doing something in that area—but mixed with all the other knowledge I learned. This made me prepared to go forward with my career.

Do you think that this career is something that you will continue doing in the future?

It is so much a part of me that I don't know where I start and my career ends! When you love to do something there is no end, just transitions from one phase to another—so yes I will do this until my last breath.

Growing up as a child what was your ideal dream job? And why?

As a child and going to school I always had a talent to draw, yet was fascinated by science and medicine. I always wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be able to help people, to make them healthy. But because I was also an artist I battled with which one to follow. All I knew at the time was I was going to go to college. My father had a high school diploma but my mother only an eighth grade education. I was the first woman in my family to get a college degree—and somewhere in those four years I was shaped

to work in the fashion world. It came naturally—not easily— but I loved to drape garments, work with wonderful fabrics and design garments that were unusual and cutting edge.

My dream was to have my own boutique creating my own collection and carry all the best designers alongside. At the same time I was also designing contemporary costumes for theater and dressed celebrities, musicians, and creating garments for advertising, magazine covers and articles. I loved the pace—lots of action, responsibility, travel and creativity. I was offered a job teaching fashion at SAIC a year after I graduated and that turned into a full time tenured teaching career that spanned almost 40 years. Chairing the department for over twenty-five of those years I taught many successful designers.

From any time period of fashion, what time has inspired you the most?

When I first started studying fashion I was intrigued by the period of 1910–20. Women began to become emancipated, loosening and then losing their corsets...becoming free. There was a beautiful "lightness of being" to the dresses and colors they were wearing. It was feminine but radical (for the time). Now I look back at the 60's and think they were the most revolutionary—a whole change appeared in society. I believe the modern architectural shapes of the designs, the clean lines, the refinement of overabundance is what appeals to me most now.

If you were to choose a different career what would it be? And why?

Today if I could go back, I think I would follow the other option to life I had dreamed about: being a doctor. I would work with Doctors without Borders, join the Peace Corps, do what I could in service to the poor and disadvantaged. I want to help people, give them a chance at life, to experience it with some dignity and beauty. I worked at an NGO in Mpumalanga, South Africa, for a total of about twelve weeks teaching young adults about sewing and how to make clothing so that they might be able to create jobs for themselves in the rural areas they lived in. There, over 70% of the people were HIV positive. It was humbling to be of service, being able to be part of their lives and bring a skill into their lives. One understands working in such situations that little things like water and electricity —which we all take for granted here—are treasured and never taken for granted.

What were some tribulations that helped you get to where you are now?

I always say that the decisions we make shape our lives and the direction it takes. Some choices are obvious—some need deep thinking—some affect others around us. We have to be wise or at least try to be wise. There are always good sides to our tribulations too. For instance:

I decided to go to college—a financial hardship on my family, but I graduated first in my family (ever!)

I chose to marry young, taking a gamble, which altered my freedom and made the opportunity of me developing a fashion career in New York or Europe impossible.

I decided never to have children—then agreed to one after my husband pleaded— and fell in love with them, having four. I feel this is my most accomplished blessing.

Most recently, I decided to stick my neck out to ask for some financial help for a colleague, and asked the wrong person. This resulted in a job termination that was shattering. Afterwards, after the dust settled, I had some wonderful advice that said when one door closes, another will open . . .and it did. I pivoted into another position, a mentoring one much more suited to my skills at this point in my career.

I am a very positive person. We can and should dream for our biggest dreams, prepare for them academically, through internships and jobs in the area we hope to have a career. We meet people, we make connections. We survive.

I am fortunate to be a designer who is producing a collection that is shown across the country. I am fortunate to be a design director at the Chicago Fashion Incubator mentoring 6 emerging designers in Chicago. I am most fortunate to be able to mentor students with honesty, experience and knowledge that they may one day be as fulfilled in a career as I am today.

It has not always been easy. Artists and designers on their own often struggle between feast and famine. But if you believe in yourself and have a dream to follow, you can survive any tribulations...and keep going forward.



Mentor Andrea Reynders (center) works with Team Crowned in Garnet of Young Women's Leadership Charter School.