

FASHIONNEXT

Team Thin Mints interviews mentor Jessica Sheehan



1) What are your past experiences in fashion?

I started in Fashion Design. I graduated from Indiana University with a BS in Apparel Merchandising, Minor in Marketing, and a Fashion Design Certificate (which was a two-year program within my bachelor's degree). Following college I went back to my job at Nordstrom. I originally started in children's shoes but quickly moved to the makeup department. Thinking back it was very interesting to have to cater to the child, who is wearing the shoes, and the parent, who is purchasing the shoes.

During college, my junior year, I applied for the YMA scholarship. I ended up winning it. The original "winning" meant you went to New York for a banquet to celebrate the winners. For some reason, I still don't know how, I was invited to a Roundtable in New York, prior to the banquet. The Roundtable was a panel of industry movers and shakers like Cynthia Rowley, Tim Gunn, and Kenneth Cole. I convinced my mom to let me fly from Indiana to NYC for the

Roundtable. The day of the event my flight was delayed. My mom said I should still go to NYC since we already paid for the trip. I shut the door to my cab (in front of FIT) at 2:00 p.m., the time the event ended. I ran inside and found students gathered around the Panel leaders asking questions. I overheard a student ask Tim Gunn, "Hey, do you ever need dressers backstage for the finale show for Project Runway?" He then directed the student to a woman from Liz Claiborne, who gave him her business card. I knew I had to make the most of my trip since the flight delay had already caused me to miss the entire event, and so I snagged her card also. I e-mailed her (politely stalked her) about weekly. I received a call from Bravo TV about two months later asking if I could help with the finale show, which was in 4 days. I flew back to New York. We arrived to the Tents around 4:00 a.m. The person in charge of all of the dressers who was wrangling us and then asked "Does anyone know how to steam?" I was amongst students from FIT, Parsons, and FIDM—all of whom looked down on the Midwestern girl who was getting her fashion degree from a Big Ten school. I, again, wanted to make the most of my time there. I raised my hand eagerly and said, "I can steam and hand sew." (Which was a skill I had been doing for only about one year.) The wrangler placed me with Jillian Lewis. She was one of three designers who was in the finale that day, which was *Project Runway* season 4. She was amongst Christian Siriano and Rami Kashou. It was clear that *Project Runway* had stressed out the designers to the maximum. She looked famished, sleep deprived, and like a walking zombie. One of her models, Jaslene Gonzalez, was smaller than small and was swimming in her dress. Jillian, looked at me and said, "Can you please cut off all of the (six) hook n' eyes and re-sew them? This dress is too big for Jaslene." There I sat, hands shaking, re-sewing this designer's finale dress. Fun fact: when you watch the season 4 finale you will see me handsewing on the floor. Well, it was a hit! Jillian was happy. Unfortunately, she did not win. Also I was unable to exchange contact information with her at the time due to the mass chaos that ensued after the show. I traveled back home only to tell my sister I never got her information. My sister, an internet sleuth, ended up finding Jillian on MySpace. I sent her my résumé and explained I was the girl who stitched her dress for Jaslene. I heard nothing back. As mentioned, I went back to work at Nordstrom following my college graduation knowing I did not want to work retail. I was walking into work one day, about three months after graduation and received a call from Jillian. She thanked me for reaching out and said, "Would you move to New York and work as my design assistant?" The catch, I would be working for no pay. I was so besides myself I immediately said yes. I told my mom and boyfriend I was to move to NYC in two weeks. I ran into work, late at this point, and put in my notice. I was scared, relieved, excited and 100 other feelings. I sold the car I had in college. That covered my rent for the year I was there. I worked at a gym, worked with Jillian, worked retail, and worked at a bar just to make any money that I could. I loved my experience with Jillian. She taught me so much and it was the greatest experience of all time. Mostly I learned right away, I did not want to be a designer. I moved home right around my one-year mark about a week after we rang the Nasdaq bell, and two Fashion Week presentations later. I felt that I never wanted to be one aesthetic. I had always dressed for my mood and so I did not want to commit to one look, the way that designers often do. I got a job working at Belle Vie/Vera Wang (luxury bridal) on Oak Street. It was there I made many contacts full on knowing that styling was what I wanted to be doing. I befriended my now close friend, Ben Mahoney. He is Founder/Owner of BMP Film Co. I told him my dreams and goals and he said "Well, I currently have videography, photography and a hair/makeup salon in

my studio space, why don't we bring on styling." It was Ben who helped me with my website and business cards. It was my own drive and determination that made me hustle for whatever clients I could get. At the same time, I began working for Visual Therapy because my grandma reminded me that my third cousin "worked in fashion." I was working with wealthy private clients. I loved it but was always researching, looking, and listening to what I could do next. I felt that going agency in Chicago was not something I was fond of, and the agencies I wanted representation from would not hire me yet because I did not have enough work under my belt. I promised myself I would discover every outlet of styling that existed in Chicago and surrounding. I then found the styling Union. There was 476 for commercial styling and 769 for tv and film. I began talking with people and asking how to get in. The answer I got was, "You have to work union jobs as a non-union member." Seems very backwards right?! I put that on the back burner. I always researched, looked and listened to what was going on, here and in Chicago. I connected with many photographers in my first five years to do "test" shoots so that I could build my book and have something to show to people when applying for jobs and reaching out to introduce myself. It is the best way to express your creativity because the concept and execution is yours. Every agency, production company, charity, magazine...I knew who they were and what they were about because each one could be a potential client. Every friend and colleague knew what I was doing.

A friend of mine, who was a former model agent, reached out to me saying he was booking talent for a shoot and they needed a stylist. I was certain I was the right fit for the job, and he booked me. It was with a production company called Bridges Media. I went above and beyond on my first shoot to ensure I would get hired back. I got hired four more times. It was not until the fifth job that the producer said, "Are you Union? We have been pulling permits on your behalf because these have been Union commercials, and you are not Union." I had no idea. I then reached out to the Union President and requested a meeting. We booked a date. I showed him my résumé and portfolio which was about three years of work at this point and expressed how incredibly interested I was in becoming a member. I left the meeting a member! After that I just wanted to keep working as often as possible. I kept reaching out to anyone and everyone (personal client, commercial, editorial, print, etc.) that might hire me. For every 100 emails I probably received two responses. As discouraging as it was I would never give up. I promised myself, set regular reminders, to always do outreach. You never know when someone or some company is looking for a stylist! I have now been a part of Local 476 for three years now. Of course, I searched for what else was out there, what more, what was my end goal. I got curious about film and TV. I began to message the Business Rep at 769 (TV and Film) Union. I found out that there was something called the "out of work list." Basically as a non-union member, you call this number every Monday and put your name on the list. If all of the union members are booked, they look to this list for people to book. I made sure I called every Monday. Suddenly, it got to the point where I could not call on Mondays because I was getting booked so much. But, I kept searching, looking and listening. And then, there was "Chicago +...". *Chicago Fire*, then *PD*, then *Med*, now *Justice*. That meant there were a lot of people in Chicago working on those shows. Why wasn't I. So I investigated into what was 769 Union (TV & Film). How do I get in? What is the process? If you work hard, have a good attitude and never give up, that's the process. About two years ago I got accepted into 769! Last year I work on *Chicago Justice*,

Exorcist, and *Shrink*. This year I have worked on a Fox Pilot and am currently on a film. I have learned so much from the commercial world. A lot of which translates to TV/Film. But TV/film has its own lingo and processes that I am working hard to learn and know fast. And when I am not working, I keep a long outreach list to send my portfolio and résumé to!!

2) Did you start as a stylist or were you in a different part of fashion first?

Started in fashion design!

3) What is your favorite part about working in the fashion industry?

I love bouncing around week to week. Sometimes I am with a private client, sometimes on a commercial, sometimes shopping/returns, sometimes working on a show or film and sometimes just planning my next move or photo shoot. I am never bored! I get to meet a lot of really cool people along the way.

4) When did you start sewing? Do you sew?

I did not start until college even though my great-grandmother was a seamstress and my grandma sews. I wish I had started sooner.

5) What are some of your favorite materials to work with?

My ultimate goal is to be a costume designer for film. I love the aspect of "collaging"—using pieces that exist and then altering them into something that you feel is perfect for your character. There is an element of creating things out of nothing and using things from the store/vintage/thrift.

6) How would you explain your personal style?

I like to say I am Whimsical Chic. I know what is "trending" but I personally do not dress or care for trends. I dress for my mood and what makes ME feel best. I love pieces with unique fabrics, texture, detail, print or pattern. I love mixing vintage with modern.

7) When you were younger did you want to go into fashion? If not what was the other occupation goal?

I am not sure that I necessarily wanted to go into fashion, partly because I did not know you could make a career as a stylist. But as a child I was always wearing expressive things. I used to change my clothes about five times a day, much to my parents dismay, depending on what I was doing or feeling. As a teen I made my mom take me to the boutiques downtown because I did not want to wear the same mall clothes that the other girls were wearing. I wanted to be me, different and unique.

8) Who are some of your favorite designers?

I love Rodarte. They always have gorgeous fabrics, details, and a lot of mixing/matching. There is this element of chaos but beautiful at the same time. I love that a lot.

9) Where do you usually get your inspiration?

I get a lot of inspiration from Instagram. I use it very seriously as a form of research. I am particular on who I follow. I use it for business purposes, not to see what my friends are doing. I love being closely tapped into the entire industry. I also use it as extension of my portfolio, but to show my personality. You might have a good eye but if you have an attitude and are not a team player people will not want you on set. Dress fabulous but leave your ego at the door!!

10) What do you like most about your job now?

I have commitment issues and so I love having a "job" that is always evolving and changing. There are always new beginnings. You meet so many awesome people. Making new friends along the way is so much fun. Getting to see crazy locations is also really exciting. The hours are anything but normal but I love going to work every single day. I feel super lucky to say that.

11) Who have you styled for? Any movies or TV shows?

Eva Longoria, Jeff Mauro (The Kitchen and Sandwich King), Fall Out Boy, *Chicago Justice*, *Exorcist*, *Controversy* (Fox pilot).

12) If there's anything else you'd like us to know please share that too!

Really, there is no easy way to get to the top. There are no handouts. Even if you have a connection you still have to work hard. Focus on your end goal and never let it go. Always be kind to everyone you meet because you will cross paths with them again. Know that you will get to where you want to go but there will be unexpected twists and turns along the way. Take advantage of every single experience because it is shaping your future. Do what you love and the money will follow. Be true to yourself!!