

Designer sends message with exotic glitter



Debbie Lim Grushong's designs send the message that creativity can't be stifled by adversity.

By Marie McUee
staff writer

Fledgling designer Debbie Lim Grushong is making more than the usual fashion statement in bold designs she is introducing to the Detroit clothing market.

Underneath all the exotic glitter and gauze is a message that creativity can't be stifled by adversity.

In Grushong's case — and that of her twin sister Donna — the misfortunes stem from a childhood marked by poverty and mistreatment. At one point, the two sisters' case came to the attention of the Department of Social Services, and the two were put in foster homes.

Their stubborn determination to stay together, however, resulted in Social Services putting the two sisters together in their apartment at age 15 as part of an independent living program.

"WE'VE BEEN ON our age more or less since we were 13," said Grushong, now 23, married and the mother of a 4-year-old son. "We had an apartment, but no furniture. We used boxes for everything."

The struggle for survival meant "we had to act tough," said Grushong.

Except for their grandmother, the only support the two sisters had came from each other, they recalled. Their Chinese ancestry made them further outcasts, they said.

"We became street people," said Grushong.

But through it all was the strong determination "to make something of ourselves. We got sick and tired of always being put down."

The feeling was manifested in the way they dressed. "We wanted people to notice us," said Grushong, now of Redford Township.

For Grushong, a flair for the theatrical coupled with a fierce resolve to succeed led to a shoestring venture into the field of fashion designing with the hope that her designs will catch on.

THAT STRONG determination is shared by her sister, who has a firmer hold in the business world. She and her husband, Scott Truss, own a radiator repair firm that began in the couple's garage and has since moved into its own building and has expanded to include auto heaters and air conditioners.

Both sisters are self-taught "street dancers" who learned to dance during their teen years on their own, mingling

with their peers in the "molting pot" of southwest Detroit. "It's sort of what's happened today with break dancing," they said.

Both appear regularly on the popular Saturday noon television show "Stars of Tomorrow," aired on Channel 2. Grushong's flair for the unusual often shows up in costumes she and her sister and other members of the cast wear on the show.

A sample of her guileless in trying to forge a career on her own came recently when she approached the owners of Jamie's on Seven, a Livonia restaurant and lounge featuring weekly fashion shows during the lunch hour.

GRUSHONG SAID SHE had seen one of the shows and found the fashions "so boring — right off the rack" that could be found in any store.

After seeing some of her sketches, the restaurant owner consented, and she had her first show two weeks ago. The result was that she sold one of the outfits, and the restaurant has asked her to do another show in the near future.

Grushong works out of her home and calls her company "Original Artistic Creations." Custom design and fit are

her forte. While she does the design work, she has a tailor execute the actual transformation from paper to material.

Her designs, which are moderately priced, are not limited to the excitingly different evening and party wear fashions that have had the most promotion, she said. She also does a line of more conservative office and casual wear.

"But my way is different," she said, with an impish smile.

Her sister is her chief model, Grushong said. Both considered at one time trying to crack into the highly competitive fashion modeling field.

Despite their stunningly good looks and fashion-model figures, they were turned down by several local agencies because of their Oriental looks that included waist-length naturally curly black hair.

All that could be changing too, Grushong said. A New York agent has contacted them and is interested in using them in a nationally televised commercial featuring twins.

That agent happens to be Peter Bennett, who has promoted such names as Michael Jackson, John Lennon, The Rolling Stones and Nat King Cole.

"He liked our looks on camera," Grushong said.

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