

2 Orlando women prepare for first collection showing

Jean Patteson | Sentinel Staff Writer
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The two Orlando women met at a belly-dancing class on [Labor Day](#) 2007. Five months later, they launched a small design business together. Now they are preparing to show their first collection during Couture Fashion Week, which opens in New York next week.

Talk about living life in the fast lane.

The pace is leaving Norma Allen and Thuy Nguyen breathless -- with excitement and fatigue.

"We feel thrilled, overwhelmed, blessed," says Nguyen, 30.

Both women still have demanding day jobs. Allen is an information technology consultant in Orlando. Nguyen is an MRI technician at South Lake Hospital. She also is the mother of a 5-year-old daughter.

But their evenings and weekends are devoted to their fledgling design business, Vocce Couture.

"I haven't had more than four or five hours sleep a night since October," says Allen, 28.

After their first meeting, the women bonded rapidly over a shared love of fashion. Their taste, they discovered, was remarkably similar. Both are drawn to designs that are "trendy, bold, sexy-but-elegant," says Nguyen.

Within months, Allen suggested they start a business together.

"I said, 'Let's meet in a week with ideas -- but it has to be something you love.' "

Each came back with a single idea: a fashion-design business.

Knowing next to nothing about designing, manufacturing or marketing fashion, they

started researching every aspect of the business. They also interned at a couple of major fashion events in Miami to get behind-the-scenes insights.

In the course of their research last fall, they came across a Web site for Couture Fashion Week, an event designed to present high-fashion collections to buyers, socialites and celebrities.

On an impulse, the women filled out an application and hit the "send" key. To their surprise, they got an e-mail back asking for more details.

Within days of forwarding a description of their planned collection and a few preliminary sketches, they got the call: They were accepted to show their designs at the legendary Waldorf- Astoria hotel on Valentine's Day.

"We thought it was a joke," says Allen.

Panic set in. How could they possibly assemble at least a dozen couture designs in less than four months?

Frantic, Allen sent an S.O.S. to a businessman friend -- who has since become their silent partner, business adviser and financial backer. He helped them develop a business plan and sign on with a marketing firm. He also introduced them to Therez Fleetwood, a successful bridal designer in New York, who has become their mentor.

"To show your first collection in New York -- it's an amazing break," says Fleetwood.

The designers, meanwhile, scrambled to create a cohesive collection, find fabrics and interview seamstresses. They chose Doris Moreno of Imperial Design in Longwood.

"She's amazing. She can make anything from just a sketch," says Allen.

The women have sunk "pretty much" their entire savings into their collection. The lace for a single dress cost \$400, says Allen, adding, "And that's without the trim or seamstress fee."

Evening gowns in black and white form the core of Vocce's Modern Elegance collection, which is days away from being completed. Other pieces are in shades of purple, blue and copper. All are extravagantly trimmed with feathers, ruffles or hand-crafted silk roses. Most will be priced about \$1,000.

"We're each doing eight designs, but we collaborate on everything. We start with a vision of the type of dress we can see ourselves wearing," explains Nguyen.

On Monday, the pair pack up their designs and head for New York for fittings with models followed by runway rehearsals. They also will spend time with Fleetwood,

learning how to get their garments produced -- assuming the show leads to orders.

"Ordering fabrics, pattern-making, getting the sizes right, shipping the designs -- the real work lies ahead," says Fleetwood.

Bring it on, say Allen and Nguyen. Much as they enjoy their current careers, they can't wait to begin designing full-time.

Jean Patteson can be reached at jpatteson@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5158.

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