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By design

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Shelby Township designer Katerina Bocci recently had her work displayed in Couture New York Fashion Week and was named Michigan Designer of the Year by Detroit Fashion Week Oct. 4.

Source photo by Chris Williams

Shelby Township could soon join New York, Milan and Italy as the home of great fashion.

Local designer Katerina Bocci wowed New York fashionistas with her showcase at Couture New York Fashion Week in September. Then on Oct. 4, she was named Designer of the Year by Detroit Fashion Week, the Motor City's premiere event for stylish citizens. Bocci has designed wardrobes for local television anchors and a soul music legend, and has been named one of Detroit's best by *Hour Detroit* magazine.

Ironically, the same woman who would one day design bridal gowns and dresses for some of Detroit's most rich and famous residents came to the country from her native Albania in 2001 with little more than the clothes on her back.

"We had to leave the country and America was the only place that could provide hope. My uncle lived in Sterling Heights, so we lived with him for those first few years," Bocci said. "We came with nothing. We had no money, no nothing."

It was an auspicious start for a fashion designer. But then again, it was odd enough for many to imagine someone designing dresses fit for the rich and famous to come from a country that was locked under a Communist regime growing up. Bocci, whose father was also a designer, knew from the start that her native land did not endorse her passion.

"It was kind of a hidden interest," she said. "It was very hard. My dad was a tailor, so the only thing he could really do was coats and jackets. People had to sneak over because the government didn't want anything done in private."

Growing up and seeing her father's work, however, fueled a love for fashion in Bocci. She said she always loved fashion and always made sure she was the best-dressed at any parties or social gatherings. She studied English and Italian languages at Oxford University, but when the opportunity

came up to work as a translator for an Italian designer and educator, she knew she had a chance to pursue her dream.

“When I heard about the program, I said, I’d like to be a student and I’ll do the translating for free.’ So I was able to do the translating and learn designing,” she said. “My father had wanted me to be a translator and speak seven languages like he did, but I speak three, so that’s not too bad.”

After graduating, Bocci opened a private school in Albania where she taught more than 200 students. Shortly afterward, however, her family had to flee the country due to political reasons. They joined Bocci’s uncle in Sterling Heights, where they would live until moving to Shelby Township in 2004. Bocci took on jobs working for various bridal salons in the area, enjoying the opportunity to work with fashion but also finding her passion and creative freedom stifled under the responsibilities of working for another owner.

“I worked at bridal salons for two years and then quit right after that because I couldn’t have the freedom to design my own looks and have things the way I wanted them; I had to carry out the owner’s wishes, not my own, which is hard when you’re an artist,” she said. “I wanted to spoil my own customers.”

Taking President Bush’s admonition to Americans to use their ingenuity to start their own businesses, Bocci worked out of the basement of her Shelby Township home, a project that was actually against Shelby Township code at the time, as Bocci found out when she applied for a permit to open her current location off of 23 Mile Road.

“When I went to go get my permit, they asked where my business was at the time and I said, ‘in my basement,’ and the guy behind the counter just laughed and yelled I didn’t hear that!’ ” she said. Bocci opened her own location to make, model and sell her designs, and quickly became noticed throughout the area for the unique style she brings to her fashion and the quality materials she weaves into every dress.

“We’re really known for our unique design and the fit we give to our customers. The fabric and quality you find here you can’t find anywhere else. I attend shows all around the world to find quality materials,” she said. “We give our customers our measurements tailored to their needs, not a mannequin’s, like other designers.”

A fashion show Bocci worked on four years ago for Team Angels, a fundraising organization for the Karmanos Cancer Institute, gave her a chance to show off her work to a wider audience, which included local television reporter Lila Lazarus, who praised Bocci’s work and hired her to design the wardrobe for her and other newscasters. Word began to spread about the rare European style Bocci brought to each design and, for the first time, the designer began to think seriously about applying for a spot in the popular New York Fashion Week.

“It’s very hard to get into. It’s also very expensive and I didn’t have anyone to sponsor me,” Bocci said. “It took me three years of working very hard and saving every penny before I was able to go.”

Last year, Bocci unveiled her first collection at New York Fashion Week and soon after was approached by Kleinfeld’s in New York, one of the world’s largest bridal salons, to be an exclusive designer. She has also had her work profiled in the *New York Times* and showcased in Detroit Fashion Week, which honored her as this year’s Designer of the Year. Two months ago she was approached by

Michigan native and stylist to the stars Mia Morgan about designing the wardrobe for the cover art for Aretha Franklin's upcoming album.

With the accolades coming in from across the nation, many may expect Bocci to pack up shop and leave the suburbs of Shelby Township for the bright lights of New York or Paris. But Bocci is perfectly happy to stay in the Detroit area, where she said there is a well of untapped talent, including stylists, models and makeup artists.

To prove her point, Bocci decided her showcase at New York Fashion Week would be centered around a "Made in Michigan" theme. Instead of using services from within New York's world-renowned fashion community, Bocci used Michigan-based models and stylists to prove that the Great Lakes State can be just as much a bastion for fashion as the Big Apple.

"It was very hard to talk the people in New York into it. But the last word I told them was 'I promise I will give you a beautiful show.' And they said, 'We know you're a fighter and we're not going to fight with you,' " Bocci said. "We worked for four months on it and it was absolutely beautiful. We were expecting around 400 people and we had 530 show up. We worked better than many of the other teams and we got lots of compliments."

The fashion bug seems to be contagious in Bocci's family. Not only was her father a tailor, but her oldest daughter Kristina, a student at Eisenhower High School, was one of the models in the New York Show. Bocci's middle daughter, Orelia, is a student at Malow Junior High School and was the youngest designer in Detroit Fashion Week's teen program. Youngest daughter, 4-year-old Antonia, has a slightly simpler job.

"She just likes following Mom around and picking up the money," Bocci laughs.

As her popularity spreads, and Bocci prepares dresses for weddings throughout the area and galas like the North American International Auto Show, she said she is not planning any other major leaps beyond preparing for next year's show in New York. While many television programs centered around the design industry are currently popular, Bocci said her goal is simply to keep Motown looking marvelous.

"My project right now is just to keep working and give my best to my customers to make them beautiful," she said.

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