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Fashion Maverick, Zizi Cardow.

## ELAN PERSONALITY: Ngozi (ZiZi) Cardow

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Two weeks after her USA debut at the Couture Fashion Week, Zizi is back in the country, busier than ever. “I nearly backed out of it (Couture Fashion week)

because I was not ready for it,” she explains, adding that the entire collection was prepped and finished in a week.

Hard to believe considering some of the great reviews she received for her collection. It is this dedication to work that has won her many fashion accolades, including Great Legend in Africa and Mother Africa merit awards in 2008, since the inception of her line in 2000.

## **Fitting In**

A native of Umuobiala in Isiukwuato, Abia State, Ngozi (ZiZi) Cardow (nee Iroh), is the 11th of 15 children in her polygamous home.

Growing up in her large family was difficult for Zizi, who described the experience as “challenging” because she “fought hard to have a voice in the midst of all the children.” Predominantly raised in Lagos, her struggle for an identity continued while undergoing secondary school in a remote location in the eastern part of Nigeria.

Zizi credits those rough beginnings for her being the strong woman she is now. “There were times I wished I was not born in a polygamous home, but now I look at it like, if I wasn’t, I would not be who I am now. For everything in life, there is a reason and purpose.”

## **Born, Not Made**

From searching for an identity to leaving a memorable one in the fashion world, Zizi’s bold and daring personality has now become identical with her designs. A self proclaimed extrovert, Zizi’s designs are unique and daring; a fusion of silk, lace, aso oke and African prints, all in striking colors.

Known for her love of the miniskirt, an item she has been wearing since 1986, Zizi’s designs are an extension of herself. “When I first started out, my designs were representations of my personality, but I find that with time I have calmed down, and they are less about me.

“I actually find that the older I get, the more traditional my designs become.”

As is the case with most talented designers, she had little formal training in her craft and began designing as a hobby. She did not think anything of it, until she won the esteemed Designer of the Year award at the 2001 Nigerian Fashion show, a competition that a friend persuaded her to enter.

“I really didn’t think anything of it when I entered the competition. I just wanted to try it for the experience and I learned a lot from it.” Originally designing company uniforms to cater to the corporate world, her Designer of the Year award motivated her to take her talent more seriously.

“After that I decided that I did not want to be a tailor. I wanted to be a brand. My goal was to make ZiZi clothing one of great quality.” And, that, she has, amassing reputable accolades like the DAME award in 2002, for outstanding achievements in fashion. But like all successes, hers came with a price.

## **Design Challenge**

Like most Nigerian designers, Zizi was faced with the problems that arise from designing in an environment that doesn’t have proper infrastructure. In addition to this, unlike in the west, it is easier to make clothes in Nigeria than buy them.

This often results in a lack of proper knowledge and passion for the craft. Zizi also had to deal with the marketability of her signature ankara fabrics during the era of popularity of western fabrics. “A reporter once asked me if I thought people will be able to wear ankara out to functions and I told him that the time is coming.”

And it has! Ankara fabrics are now seen everywhere—from weddings to nightclubs.

In the midst of those initial challenges, Zizi never backed down. “Challenges are not really measured by how much you can overcome them because if they exist, they exist; however, I am able to face them because I love what I do.”

Her passion for her craft is undeniable, considering that she spends 90 per cent of her time working, and invests everything she has into her business.

## **Out of Africa**

At the time when most designers were keen on laces and more exorbitant fabrics, Zizi made ankara the focal point of her designs. She says that her mission has always been to push forward the African fabric. “The good thing about African fabric is that it goes with the weather.

“The colours are vibrant, it is easy to maintain and it is also cost effective. My whole idea was to look good without breaking the bank.”

That objective, coupled with her inspiration that comes from her culture and heritage, resulted in her “statement making” versatile pieces, that have the wonderful ability of taking you from casual day look to night-time glam.

Zizi, whose definition of style is “elegant simplicity”, says that other notable aspects of her designs include her use of asymmetrical lines, which she states represent the imperfect nature of life—its ups and downs, good and bad.

### **At Home with Zizi**

Without a doubt, Zizi has come a long way in the world of fashion. However, she describes her 15-year-old daughter as being her greatest achievement.

It is hard to believe that you are with daughter and mother when you see Zizi and her daughter together; there is no denying that they share a close bond that is unique. Balancing her home life with her work life has never been difficult for this self-proclaimed “funky mom”, who takes pride in being her daughter’s best friend.

“She is with me when I am working. We are able to interact on many levels, but at the same time, I let her know the boundaries.”

### **Forever Zizi**

“My outlook on life is to never take anything seriously,” she says. This is apparent in the sense that, after chatting with her for a while, you get the feeling that you can ask her about anything. “I think the greatest thing that one can do is to be happy. I take pride in not letting anything worldly upset me.”

After showcasing at the esteemed Couture week in New York, what’s next for this fashion maven? “I am looking forward to my 10th year anniversary. After

that, I don't know. I've never been good at planning." Regardless of what she chooses to do or not do, one thing's for sure: Zizi came, she saw and she conquered.

"I want people to look at me and know that I was able to affect and change how people see things through fashion."

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