

DiNardo pursues dreams in NYC

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By LaMont Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Julia DiNardo was growing up in Highland Park, she found it easier to make her clothes than to track down the edgy styles she wanted in petite sizes she needed.

Six years ago, the summer before her senior year at Oakland Catholic, she taught herself how to sew and began stitching up tops for herself. That led to an interest in fashion design, and it wasn't long before she heard the same inner voice that calls to many aspiring designers: "Get thee to New York City."

And that's where DiNardo is now, preparing to graduate in December from Columbia University with a master's degree in Italian. She plans to use that education -- as well as a bachelor's degree in fashion marketing and Italian from New York University and two textile courses at New York's prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology -- to help her design business grow.

DiNardo, 23, is working on spring 2005, her sixth collection of women's tops. Her 12-piece fall line, which includes silk ponchos, sequined T-shirts and woolly capelets, is at Sugar Boutique, 3703 Butler St., Lawrenceville (412-681-5100), and two Flirt boutiques in Brooklyn. Prices for Julia DiNardo tops range from \$18 to \$50. Forty bucks can get you a pretty silk scarf poncho or a chic short-sleeve green kimono top.

Jamie Rivers, owner of Sugar Boutique, said DiNardo shows promise because her designs are easy to wear and affordable.

"She works well into the whole independent designer scene that is becoming more prevalent in cities like Austin, L.A., San Francisco and even Pittsburgh," said Rivers. "She is becoming known for her use of designer fabrics and reconstructing them for a feminine fit with a flair."

DiNardo recently traveled to Italy to buy fabric for her spring collection. Between studies she works part time as an editorial assistant at Primo, a bimonthly Italian-American magazine.

After graduating from Columbia, DiNardo plans to seek a full-time job while continuing to work on her design label. She spends 15 to 20 hours a week designing and makes every garment by hand. She'd like to hire seamstresses in the future but doesn't ever want to manufacture her clothes.

Designers such as Ralph Lauren, Michael Kors, Marc Jacobs, Balenciaga and As Four inspire her, she said, because they have "a clear theme" but are able to reinvent themselves afresh each season.

Becoming a full-time designer is a dream that motivates DiNardo. While following an educational track that would maximize her success, she got marketing and public relations experience working for Ralph Lauren, Barbara Bui, Benetton and Sisley.

"The sky is the limit," she said. "I definitely want to expand into all markets," including maternity, plus sizes and menswear.

DiNardo has donated pieces to auctions to help raise funds for an Italian charity in New York, the Pennsylvania Organization for Women in Early Recovery and her alma mater, Oakland Catholic, which last year named her Alumna of the Year.

She's been somewhat of a pioneer in an Italian immigrant family that largely remains residents of Pittsburgh's East End. Her parents have never lived outside Pittsburgh and have lived in the same Highland Park home for 27 years. Her father, Louis, was born in Larimer, grew up in Morningside and graduated from Central Catholic and the University of Pittsburgh. Her mother, Claudia, was born in Stanton Heights and graduated from Sacred Heart High School and Point Park College.

So Julia's parents were a little nervous when the elder of their two children headed to The Big Apple and life in America's fastest lane.

"I'm still not comfortable with it," admitted her father. "I don't know if I ever will be, wherever she is. But she knew better than I did that this was probably the best place on the planet to pursue her interest in fashion."

Julia said her father initially seemed to think she was playing around, that she wasn't serious about fashion design. But after seeing her designs in a fashion show at NYU, she recalled, he was so filled with pride that he paid for her first set of label tags.

"She sweeps us all up into it," he said. "She has a passion for it. She was always a kid that tied a shirt in a knot in a different way. She wanted to be different and wanted to challenge a lot of things."

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