

A FASHIONABLE JOB; Creating kiddie couture; Young designer from Bayville finds girls just want to have bling in their clothes Newsday (New York) November 12, 2006 Sunday

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BY SOPHIA CHANG. STAFF WRITER

As a designer, what Nicole Bagnuola wears to work is typical of New York's fashion industry: minimalist, chic and often monochromatic ensembles.

When Bagnuola, a fresh-faced 23-year-old native of Bayville, wears a preppy plaid headband and black moccasin boots, she makes the unusual combination look fiercely hip.

But despite the sophisticated choices in her own clothing, Bagnuola's real enthusiasm lies with a small, aqua-blue velour jacket with a sporty team number printed in the middle. The jacket is trimmed with a rainbow cuff, studded with tiny rhinestones, and as brightly different from her black attire as possible.

"This is my favorite. It's so colorful," she said recently, stroking the jacket sleeve in the showroom of the company where she works.

Designing for kids

Bagnuola crafted that jacket and about 50 other pieces for Candy Queen, a division of the children's apparel company Weeplay Kids, which has its headquarters in Midtown.

She is the only designer for the line, which focuses on casual, sporty clothes for girls ages 6 through 16 and is sold at mid-level stores such as BJ's and Century 21. At age 23, she is an unusually young participant in the \$28.5 billion children's clothing industry.

Bagnuola began honing her fashion instincts early. "Since I was 3, I was sketching clothes like dresses," she said. "I used to sit there watching TV and just sketching what I saw."

Bagnuola took extra classes in fashion design at the Nassau BOCES Cultural Arts Center in Syosset while a senior at Locust Valley High School. She took classes in fashion design, photography, painting and other fine arts.

"It really helped. It was so specialized that once you made the commitment, you never looked back," Bagnuola said.

The next step was going to the renowned Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan for college, where she said she built on what she had learned at BOCES. Eventually, she discovered she wanted to focus on children's wear.

"I liked her designs especially, because she had a very interesting approach to children. Neither baby-ish, but not too adult," said Kathy Strack, an assistant adjunct professor at FIT, who taught Bagnuola during her senior year.

"She had a great mix of fabric, patterns and colors, and a great eye for details," Strack said. "Her clothes were girly - for cool, sophisticated girls."

Her work impressed the industry. She was one of 10 students featured in a 2005 issue of Children's Business magazine, as part of the "Future of Design."

On-the-job training

During college, Bagnuola had two internships at children's clothing labels and a part-time job as an assistant designer. The extensive experience helped her get a head start after college; Many graduates have to work as assistants for some years before landing an actual designer position. Bagnuola graduated in May 2005 and immediately began working on launching Candy Queen for Weeplay Kids.

"They must think she must have a good business head. It's very unusual for someone to be so young and to have such a huge responsibility already," Strack said.

Given New York's status as fashion capital and the area's number of design schools and programs, scores of fashion designers hit the job market every year. But while "Project Runway" might give the impression that the ultimate fashion goal is designing elaborate haute couture dresses, Bagnuola says she loves the challenges of the children's market.

"I can take what I wear and translate it down for younger girls," she said. "I'll look at trends a lot, look at what women my age are wearing and use that as inspiration."

Plus, she said, "It's just so much fun. The colors, the artwork, the fabric. It's fashion brought down."

Design musts

There are certain absolutes in designing clothes for girls. "Pink. Whether I want to or not, I always have to do pink," Bagnuola said, rolling her eyes and laughing. "You have to use bling, because all the little girls want bling. I'll use rhinestones, sequins, sugar glitter, screen printing. I'm starting to use more trims like lace or gold studs, too."

But, she adds, "I don't do anything scandalous, because I keep in mind a little kid is going to be wearing this."

Children's clothing is a growing but crowded industry, with nearly a thousand vendors selling to U.S. retailers, according to Women's Wear Daily. Last year's sales of Candy Queen clothes were not available, but the private company's vice president, Isaac Maleh, said he expects Weeplay Kids, with its 13 lines of children's and infant wear, will do about \$60 million in sales next year.

The scope of the competition was apparent during a recent expedition to the Century 21 in Westbury, where Bagnuola's favorite aqua velour jacket and matching pants were priced at \$21.97, marked down from a label price of \$39. There were five versions of that style available, but they were lined up on two racks among dozens in the crowded store.

Rebecca Bressler, 7, who had come from Great Neck to shop with her mom, Michele, sized up two different versions of the Candy Queen jog sets and made a face when asked if she liked it.

"She wouldn't wear it. But I think a jogging suit is a perfect outfit for a 7-year-old," said Michele Bressler, as her daughter pulled her toward a rack of jeans with glittery belts.

Dolores Spielberg from Wantagh, who was shopping for her granddaughters, compared the Candy Queen line favorably to Juicy Couture, a popular sportswear brand for adults.

"I like the style," she said, casting a critical eye on the fabric composition. "It's a very nice design, and it's very reasonably priced."

Bagnuola knows her clothes have a fan base close to home: "I see little girls in Bayville wearing them."

GRAPHIC: 1) Photo by Robert Mecea - Nicole Bagnuola, 23, of Weeplay Kids is surrounded by the clothes she designs for little girls. 2) Photo by CHARLES ECKERT - Below, she sketches ideas. 3) Photo by CHARLES ECKERT - For some designers the ultimate goal is a haute couture label, but Nicole Bagnuola has always been focused on children's wear.