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Twin Cities make fashion statement

Many young designers are picking Minnesota over Manhattan

BY ALLISON KAPLAN

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The fashion industry tends to forget that an entire country exists between New York and California, but Minnesota will finally get to strut its style on national TV.

That's thanks to Katherine Gerdes, a graduate of the Arts High School of Golden Valley, who is one of 15 designers competing on the third season of Bravo's reality series "Project Runway," which kicks off Wednesday. The 25-year-old epitomizes a blossoming community of Twin Cities designers who are discovering that it is possible to influence fashion from the state best known for shapeless down parkas.

In just the past few years, the Twin Cities has seen the launch of two local fashion magazines. Fashion shows have become as common as summer music fests. The College of St. Catherine in St. Paul created a fashion design program, because of popular demand. And both St. Paul and Minneapolis have welcomed boutiques specializing in locally designed apparel. One of them, Design Collective in Minneapolis, features the work of an impressive 60 local designers.

Some of those designers have been here all along and are finally reaching the public, thanks to these new avenues for exposure. But something more is at play. Graduates of the most prestigious fashion schools in the country are suddenly choosing Minneapolis over Manhattan for one reason: Target.

"We've been on a mission in the last three years to bring in a lot of really young talent, nurture and develop it," said Michael Alexin, vice president of design and development for clothing and accessories at Target. Partnering with well-known designers like Isaac Mizrahi and Liz Lange has become a successful formula for the Minneapolis-based mass merchant, but it takes a huge staff of designers behind the big names to get the job done. Target now recruits graduates of the Fashion Institute of Technology and Parsons School of Design in New York, as well as other top fashion incubators where the average student has his or her sights set on a couture fashion house in New York or Paris.

Gerdes is part of that class of young designers — Target lured her back to the Twin Cities straight out of the Rhode Island School of Design.

"From my viewpoint, I could go to Target and know that I was going to work on successful lines, or I could go with some couture designer and maybe I wouldn't get paid," said Gerdes, who is on a leave of absence for "Project Runway."

Kevin Jankowski, assistant director for career programs at RISD, has noted a shift in student attitudes as Target has created internship opportunities and taken to flying prospective designers to Minneapolis for tours. The retailer is emphasizing its extensive

in-house training in everything from computer-assisted design to the financial aspects of fashion. Plus, fledgling designers get to dive into actual projects rather than sweep the floors for a year or two.

"There's this notion when you think of fashion that everything has to be Tom Ford or John Galliano — all high end," said Ra'mon-Lawrence Coleman, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who joined Target's menswear design team last year. "But we live in a mainstream society. To be a designer is not just couture. You've got to speak to the mass market — that's more important. Most of my classmates are in awe that I work for Target."

Meghan Brace ditched a job with Saks Fifth Avenue in New York when a headhunter called about an opportunity to design children's clothing for Target.

"If you had asked me a year ago if I would move to Minnesota, I'd have said no way. I was dead set on New York," said Brace, a graduate of Georgia's Savannah College of Art and Design. "But I just fell in love when I came to interview. I'm learning so much more here."

The Twin Cities arts community is taking advantage of the wealth of talent Target is bringing to town. Within weeks of her arrival, the clothing line Brace designs on the side, called Ann Alyse, was available at Design Collective, and she had been invited to participate in a fashion show.

"Fashion seems so much more accessible here," Brace said. "Everyone is hungry for it." Coleman has had a similar experience. A month after moving here, a gallery curator asked him to contribute to a show called Fashion Is Art Art Is Fashion. Since then, he has designed "deconstructed chic" pieces for three other local fashion shows, including Diva Minnesota, a major charity event that attracts around 3,000 socialites and CEOs.

"We encourage that," said Target's Alexin of his staff's extracurricular projects. "We want designers to grow creatively — as long as it doesn't conflict with their work at Target." Because of its national scale, Target can seem like the only game in town for designers, but other companies are contributing to Minnesota's fashion renaissance, said Sue Hendricks, a fashion and apparel professor at St. Catherine's. Locally based Christopher & Banks and Gander Mountain also are giving aspiring clothing designers reasons to stay in Minnesota.

"We've got enough of a base that students can find jobs to support themselves while at the same time getting established with their own collections," Hendricks said.

The question is, will they stay once they've gained the experience needed to get their own collections off the ground? Gerdes, who can't reveal how she did on "Project Runway," said she is in no rush to move to New York. But she knows that in practical terms — textiles, sourcing, access to national retailers and publicity — she may have to. That's what happened to Plymouth-based Royal Plush, a high-end women's sportswear line picked up by 500 stores nationwide, which prompted the owners to relocate to Los Angeles this summer to be closer to their Asian manufacturers and the A-list celebrities

who could give their product buzz.

Still, Minnesota has the potential to be more than a launching pad for a big career in fashion. Just look at Joy Teiken, whose five-year-old Minneapolis-based Joynoelle women's line has been featured in national fashion magazines and at shows in New York and worn on the red carpet by actress Andie MacDowell. Teiken recently opened a showroom in New York, which she visits once a month, but she is committed to keeping her main studio — and her home — in the Twin Cities.

"When people find out I'm from Minneapolis, they love it," said Teiken, who is working on some pieces for a glitzy event in the Hamptons in honor of fashion empress Donna Karan.

"Fashion is not thought of as coming from the Twin Cities, but design is. People have great respect for that," Teiken said. "It's important to me to stay here, so I'm making it happen."

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- Designer Katherine Gerdes is known in Minnesota for her affordable classic looks with quirky details.
- Do you fancy yourself a budding fashion star? Find your chance to show your designs or participate in these local shows.
- "Project Runway" personality Tim Gunn dishes on his "den father" role with the contestants and his "Make it work" catchphrase.
- A who's who and what's what on the Bravo TV series.