

A Night of Fashion, Philanthropy

A Teen Designer Honors a Friend Who Died of Cancer

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Sixteen-year-old Nick Aburn had a chance to design only one thing for his friend Emily Davis before she died of bone cancer last spring. It was a simple creation, with none of the elaborate nips and tucks and body-hugging cuts that define his latest designs. Just black letters across the front of a pink T-shirt that read: "Can't hold me down." On the back, Nick drew a big heart.

"She didn't have time" to be sick, Nick said. "I could only hope to have that much bravery and finesse."

So it was only fitting that his first fashion show be held in her honor. Last week, Nick and his friends and family turned the gym at Centennial High School into a veritable New York runway for a night dubbed "Fashion Meets Philanthropy."

Proceeds from the event -- more than \$3,000 -- went to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which had built an art studio for Emily in her home. The night of the show, a disc jockey spun "Disco Inferno" by rapper 50 Cent. A catwalk bathed in white lights stretched across the basketball court. The logo for Nick's label, Dieri, a derivative of his mother's maiden name, hung from the rim of the hoop.

"Emily would've loved it," said Vanessa Aburn, Nick's mother.

Nick and Emily grew up down the road from each other in Ellicott City. They met on the school bus as kindergarteners at Centennial Lane Elementary School and immediately became friends, said Emily's mother, Carol Davis. Emily loved all forms of art -- drawing, painting, pottery, crafts. Davis said her daughter never understood why her older sister, Alex, who played soccer, would want to sweat. Instead, Emily spent her Friday nights in a studio taking lessons with a local artist.

Emily learned that she had Ewing's sarcoma in 2002, in the middle of eighth grade at Burleigh Manor Middle School. She was 13. The pain began in her shoulder but quickly moved to her back. She left school to undergo aggressive treatment.

In the summer of 2002, Make-A-Wish built an art studio for Emily in her basement, complete with a pottery wheel and glazes, a kiln, an easel, paints, a television and a refrigerator -- "just about anything you could ever want for your own little room, where you could just stay and play," Davis said. Emily and Nick would spend hours down there, she said.

By September 2002, Emily was feeling well enough to return to school, as a freshman at Centennial. The hair that she lost during chemotherapy had grown back. The day she returned to school, Emily caught a ride with Alex and Nick.

But within a few months, she relapsed. The cancer was attacking her skull, and her head hurt so much that she could barely lift it off her pillow, Davis said. Once again, she left school for treatment.

Emily received a bone marrow transplant from her sister, who was 17 months older, in the spring of 2003. The procedure seemed to renew her, and Emily told her mom that she felt better than she had in a long time.

That fall, Nick threw Emily a surprise 15th birthday party. He gave her a book of paintings by Peter Max, known for his colorful, whimsical art from the 1960s. Emily adored it and wanted to re-create some of his works. Vanessa Aburn said she told Emily to find a canvas and paint a picture, thinking that she might be able to hang it up afterward. But Emily had other ideas. She wanted to paint an entire wall in Nick's basement.

"And I was like, 'Okay, you go girl!' ", Vanessa Aburn said.

She had planned to take Emily and Nick to New York after Christmas that year, she said. But on Dec. 26, Emily developed a mysterious fever. In January 2004, the cancer had returned, this time in her lungs.

"I remember her sitting with the doctor and saying: 'I'm going to die. This means I'm going to die,' ", Davis said.

One of Nick's final memories of Emily was of her visiting him while he was baby-sitting that winter, he said. Emily was feeling good that night. They didn't talk about cancer or her treatment or how much time she might have left. Just a couple of teenagers hanging out, they watched "The Lizzie McGuire Movie."

"It wasn't a goodbye," Nick said. "I was definitely consciously trying to appreciate the moment."

Emily died not long afterward.

Around October, the idea of putting on a fashion show began to take hold in Nick. But a show by itself seemed self-indulgent, he said. So he decided to use the opportunity to raise money for Make-A-Wish.

The evening opened with the names of top designers read over a thumping techno beat. It featured dresses that Nick had designed during high school for his friends to wear to dances as well as new creations. The models walked down the catwalk in flippy miniskirts with sashes and ribbons and sky-high stilettos. There was a sheer black tube top paired with a black pencil skirt, a cap-sleeve cropped sweater with a chain draped across the front, and a turquoise skirt with black leggings.

Alex, tall and thin like her sister, Emily, would have been, was a model and a natural on the runway. She strutted across it wearing a short gold dress, one of the night's most memorable pieces.

Davis watched from the audience as Alex enjoyed her moment in the spotlight. She realizes that her daughter and Nick, along with the rest of Emily's friends, are moving on with their lives. Prom has come and gone. Nick interned last year with New York designer Yigal Azrouel and has set his sights on fashion school.

"It's easy for me to think they've all forgotten about her," Davis said. But the show proved her wrong, she said. "She's still a part of their soul."