

Style with substance

Charity fashion show becomes a labor of love for teenaged designer

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By Stefanie Ickowski

Friends of Nick Aburn who were asked to model, from left, Sarah Rothleitner, Alex Davis, Sarah Korn, Chloe Heckman, Caitlin Burr, Meghan Emery, squatting, and Haneefa Muhammad.



Models wearing gowns in bright purple, teal and gold were greeted at the end of the runway with applause and camera flashes as the audience caught a glimpse of the boutique-worthy designs. The gowns were only a portion of 60 designs worn at a benefit fashion show March 2nd at Centennial High School.

At the hub of the event was a talented senior named Nick Aburn, who designed and constructed the clothes, and put the event together. For Aburn, the show, called "Fashion Meets Philanthropy," was more than a vehicle to show off his designing talents - it was a chance to honor a friend.

Aburn organized the event to raise money for the Make-a-Wish Foundation. It was held in memory of his classmate, **Emily Davis**, whose wish for an art studio was granted before the 15-year-old died of bone cancer in 2004. "Between my love of fashion and Emily's love of art, a fashion show seemed appropriate," Aburn said. In fact, Emily Davis' sister, Alex Davis, was the first model to take to the runway set up in the gym. She wore a knee-length teal dress.

It was Aburn's drive and skill that moved the project from A to Z. In addition to designing and sewing 60 outfits - all for young women - he had to find a venue, models and other volunteers to help with the show. "Nick was very good about having a support team from the start," Nick's mother, Vanessa Aburn, said.

Centennial vice Principal, Shawn Hastings assisted Aburn with reserving the gym for the event. "I helped with the logistics, but Nick's very efficient. He did a lot of this by himself," Hastings said. Once the date was set, Aburn spent several months making dresses, gowns, skirts, shorts and tops in his sewing room at home.

"Nick has been sewing nonstop," Vanessa Aburn said just prior to the show. "I thought there'd be smoke coming out of the sewing machine." Although Aburn has taken a few sewing lessons over the past three years, he said he is mostly self-taught. "I've improved by basically making designs, sewing them and learning from my mistakes," he said. Centennial doesn't offer fashion classes, but Aburn is part of a gifted and talented intern/mentor program, through which he works with Manish Singh, who designs for Victor Rossi in Baltimore.

"It's a good opportunity for him to see what the business side of fashion is like and how to get fashions produced," said Michelle Bagley, a resource teacher with the program. "Nick is ... one of those students who you know is going to go on and do incredible things," she added.

Waiting to see new creations two hours before the show, the 14 models practiced walking the narrow runway. Coaching them was Debbie Miller, a family friend, who has produced shows at the Fashion Show Mall in Las Vegas. "The girls are tons of fun to work with," Miller said. "They don't have any attitude, they pay attention and they want to show off the clothes." "The concept for this fashion show is awesome because it's for charity, as well as to expose the talent of a young star on the rise," she said.

In a smaller, adjoining gym that acted as a backstage area, some models were having their hair and makeup done, while others waited in makeshift dressing rooms created from gym mats stood up on their sides. A chart detailing each model's outfit, shoes and accessories was taped near the backstage door.

Aburn said he makes clothes in all sizes, so when it came time to pick students to model he didn't have to make his decisions based on body type. "My choice of models isn't so much about aesthetics as it is who has the most fun, personality and confidence when they're out on the runway," he said.

Due to a scheduling conflict, Caitlin Burr didn't get to model last year. When asked by Aburn again this year, she jumped at the chance. "I've always been friends with Nick, and Emily Davis was in my grade so I wanted to participate," the Centennial senior said.

Aburn also recruited other students to work at the show. Junior Rachael Lisman volunteered as an usher in part to fulfill some community service hours for the National Honor Society as well as to see Aburn's new creations. "I came to the show last year and it was a lot of fun," Lisman said. "I'm very excited to see what he has this year." By 7:30 p.m., a half-hour before the show, the hallways were lined with students and parents buying tickets and also T-shirts designed by Aburn. Music blasted throughout the gym. A few models - some with hot rollers still in their hair - took a last-minute practice walk in very high heels.

Soon, the gym lights went off and bright lights shone on the runway. Hastings, who had a front-row seat, didn't bat an eyelash at some of the skimpier creations, including tiny metallic gold shorts and tube tops. "Nick's designs are really remarkable," she said. "They reflect his fun personality."

The models made a final trip together down the runway, and Aburn received a standing ovation. He then announced that \$8,500 had been raised, adding that his goal of \$7,000 for the Make-a-Wish Foundation was met before the event got under way, thanks to advance sales of tickets and T-shirts. "The little pieces that everyone contributed really added up," Aburn said. "It's given me a sense of community that I've never experienced before."