

FASHION DESIGN



In the whimsical pink studio behind her North Scottsdale home, Angela Johnson adjusts the bodice of her signature T-shirt ball gown.

Designer Dreams & Realities

By Kimberly Hundley
Photography by Mark Susan

Aspiring fashion designers often walk out of a small-business consultation with Angela Johnson realizing their dreams need some serious alterations.

"I call it bubble bursting," says Johnson, an award-winning clothing designer and fashion instructor who also acts as a consultant for those seeking industry guidance. She takes clients through the obstacles and intricacies of producing their own lines—details she knows from first-hand experience. "You have to have a *lot* of money or education," she says.

Valley-based designers face the challenges of launching and sustaining a clothing design business in a city without much of a fashion industry. Phoenix has no garment district and only limited design opportunities.

As a designer working from her home off East Shea Boulevard, Johnson is one of the few locals to find success in her own backyard, and even she has to teach classes to keep revenue flowing. Her clothing line, sold online and in select boutiques, features quirky couture made from recycled T-shirts.

"Teaching fashion is my other outlet," says Johnson, an adjunct professor at Collins College and Mesa Community College. "I really enjoy teaching people about the industry. I wish somebody would have come to me when I was in high school—I would have gone straight to fashion school." Johnson now leads classes in fashion illustration, sewing, clothing construction, textiles and public relations, as well as fashion design and how to put a line together.

The majority of her students intend to pursue a career in the fashion industry, she says. Those who stay in the Valley tend to

apply their education to jobs in merchandising, while a few move to New York City or Los Angeles to assist designers.

Fashion Tale

After attending Northern Arizona University, where she did a lot of snowboarding, Johnson realized she had a passion for design. She graduated from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles, and almost instantly landed an entry-level "sweatshop" job with X-girl Clothing, owned by Mike Diamond of The Beastie Boys, her favorite band.

Johnson worked her way up from cutter to production manager, making connections and learning the ropes before deciding to launch her own line, inspired by board-sports fashions. The effort involved a lot of shoe leather—Johnson handled design, production and sales, physically hauling fabrics to cutters and sweet talking contacts into working on smaller projects that they ordinarily would not bother with.

Most important, she had a soap-actress friend and investor who paid for everything.

Then just as the line was growing internationally and on the cusp of sub-

Angela Johnson Designs North Scottsdale

Angela creates one-of-a-kind pieces from “thrifted” and scavenged T-shirts. Colors and even specific T-shirt themes may be requested. Signature items include her party dresses (\$400), T-shirt corset (\$190), and Knee-length Circle Skirt (\$70). Customers may request colors and even T-shirt themes when ordering. Each piece is made by hand and custom fit. Order online or call for appointment. angela@angelajohnsondesigns.com; 602-481-1032

stantial profits, life intervened. Johnson’s grandmother died, and she moved back to Arizona to take care of her grandfather.

Because of the lack of local resources in Arizona, continuing the clothing line wasn’t an option.

“I had to figure out something else to do,” Johnson says.

While shopping the vintage stores for inspiration, she came up with the idea of using readily available material—graphic tees. Johnson designed a new line trans-

forming recycled shirts into one-of-a-kind creations including ball gowns.

“I completely reconstruct them in different silhouettes,” she says.

Johnson also began teaching fashion classes. The Valley may not have much in the way of an industry, but ironically there is a lot of training here, says Johnson, singling out Mesa Community College for its million-dollar program and state-of-the-art machinery.

Even with talent and education, however, launching a clothing line is expensive. Just getting a sample line ready to show to prospective buyers costs thousands—checks must go out for pattern makers, sewers, models, fittings and reps. If you’re fortunate enough to get orders, the production bill can climb to \$100,000.

Part of Johnson’s curriculum involves communicating the financial realities of the business. “For me, the rewarding part of teaching is to explain that to students before they go out and spend their money and go out of business,” she says. “Instead, they may want to find an investor or go to L.A.

and get established and make contacts.”

Because there are so few design jobs in the Valley, those determined to make it as designers have little choice other than heading to a big city—unless they start their own business. “And then you are limited because you can’t mass produce,” says Johnson.

It’s that inability to mass produce that holds Johnson back from growing her own popular line. Because each T-shirt logo is carefully placed by hand, the dresses can’t be made by machine. “There is only so much of me, so I’m kind of at the max of how many orders I can do,” she says, adding that just a few more sales per week would be a perfect balance.

Johnson knows she could probably be one of those brand-name designers if she were willing to relocate. But she’s doing the kid thing these days, and life is good.

“I really love Scottsdale. It’s so family friendly, and my husband loves it here now too,” she says. “I love working for myself, and I love that my studio is in my backyard.” ■