

Mesa Community College Graduate Takes Her Thrifty Designs to the Big Apple

100°F, Partly Cloudy

Vara Ayanna Johnson's Story of Hard Work and Thrifting

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The average person has a hard enough time discovering his or her passion, and, if it ever is found, following one's ambitions and sharing them with the world is even tougher.

Vara Ayanna Johnson has been lucky enough to find her calling in life and works everyday to make her dreams a reality and spread her life's mantra to whoever will listen.



Adam Moreno, College Times

The 21-year-old fashionista and body peace enthusiast merges local designers, photographers, models, makeup artists and other industry professionals of all different styles and backgrounds. She handpicks aspiring professionals in Arizona and often styles and directs photo shoots on her own.

Johnson, who goes by Ayanna, learned to sew at a young age from her grandmother who was a seamstress. By the time she was 5, she loved attaching scraps of fabric and buttons onto purses and whatever else she could get her hands on.

"Ayanna has always been a creative soul," says her older sister Shanice Johnson. "She has a lot of ideas. She is great at pushing herself and others forward."

Johnson credits discovering her passion for fashion to her grandmother and is grateful for the tough criticism she received when she got started.

“My grandmother would scream at me when I did things wrong, but now I thank her for it because I’m a great sewer,” Ayanna says.

Her grandmother isn’t the only family member who sparked her interest in fashion. Her mother, Varalyn Johnson, is a local artist and teacher. She has been present in the Arizona Arts Commission for 14 years as a traditional folk artist and brought Vara along to her art classes when she was little.

Johnson’s creativity is most inspired by shopping at thrift stores, and she is easily labeled as a thrift and vintage shopping fanatic. Some of her best finds include a pair of Ray Ban sunglasses she found at the Salvation Army for \$2 near her home in Mesa and a vintage jewel-encrusted locket.

“I collect clothing. My family likes to joke that I have enough pieces to clothe a small village,” Johnson says.

However, she doesn’t just shop for herself. She searches for great finds in all sizes, for men, women and is a fan of vintage and costume jewelry as well. This collection is the base of her clothing line.

Thrift Queen revamps old pieces of clothing into urban street style outfits sold on Etsy.com and at the Tempe Buffalo Exchange and Meat Market Vintage on Mill Avenue.

Johnson’s favorites of the line include a green jersey and mesh dress she found at Desert Industries, a small thrift shop in Mesa that she frequents. She breathed new life into the simple dress with shoulder pads and paneling done with Kente cloth. It’s a fabric Johnson says is like the national fabric of Africa because it’s so easily identifiable.

“I see a really confident woman wearing this dress,” she says. “It’s definitely made for a fashionista that isn’t afraid to take a risk. Most of my stuff targets people that have weird taste and like weirder things.”

Her favorite men’s piece is a vintage, acid wash Levi’s denim jacket that had been cut into a vest when Johnson found it at a half-off bin at Goodwill. She added studs around the seams and paneled a gold-brushed African print fabric to the back.



Adam Moreno, College Times



Adam Moreno, College Times

“I love this print because of the tribal mask pattern, and the gold makes it feel special,” Johnson says.

When it comes to redesigning and DIY-ing items, Johnson adds, “I try not to put myself so hard into the clothing because I know not everyone’s style is as crazy as mine.”

Johnson describes her look as “Grandma meets a Technicolor rainbow” because she loves to combine old and trendy pieces with plenty of bright colors and jewelry for an eclectic, urban feel.

Despite her talent with needle and thread, Johnson sees herself as more of a business woman and entrepreneur.

“Ayanna is a great designer and stylist but she’s an even better creator and orchestrator,” Shanice says.

Johnson’s ultimate professional goal is to be the head of her own fashion corporation because she loves every facet of the industry.

Along with her clothing line, Thrift Queen, Johnson has her own fashion blog, varaayanna.com, where she showcases her inspiration and sneak peeks of projects she’s working on and outfits she’s put together.

Her blog is also filled with inspirational quotes that reflect her attitude toward the fashion industry.

“My goal for the fashion industry is to change the way people look at each other,” Johnson says.

Ayanna, a “chubby black girl,” as Shanice puts it, sees herself as a leader for everyday people who love fashion but don’t fit the typical fashionable aesthetic.

Through fashion blogging and design, she hopes to break the barrier between what the fashion world deems beautiful and what everyday women see as beautiful.

“If you look at a magazine, at all the Photoshop, that isn’t a person. The people don’t look like real people anymore. I want the fashion industry to be less fake,” Johnson says.

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