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Fall fashion events seek to raise money for charity, boost lesser-known designers

ZACK ROSEN

Friday, August 17, 2007

Although the world of fashion is often characterized by displays of excess and hipper-than-thou detachment, autumn in Washington finds several high-profile couture events displaying a social conscience along with the new threads. This September and October, Fashion Fights Poverty, D.C. Fashion Week and Runway Africa will take aim at the popular notion that fashion can't help a cause.

Slated this year for Oct. 26, Fashion Fights Poverty (FFP) was started two years ago by Michael Dumlao, Sylvie Luanghy and Kadrieka Maiden, the founders of the Style & Image Network, a public relations firm. The trio wanted to create a socially conscious couture event and disprove the notion that D.C. is too conservative to have its own sense of fashion.

"Fashion is just not what D.C. is known for," says Maiden, whose background is in public relations and television production. "D.C. is known for being political, but fashion is here, too. We're trying to change perception."

Since its inception, FFP has featured a lavish fashion show and donated the proceeds to a selected charity. This year, the creations of eight designers will grace the runway and a slew of international models and photographers have contributed to a Vogue magazine-inspired "Look Book," which combines professional fashion shoots with printed guidelines to ethical shopping.

Last year, FFP raised more than \$10,000 for Ugandan charity "Beads for Life," a group that trains Ugandan women to make beads out of paper that they can then sell. This year's beneficiary, Aid to Artisans, introduces world crafts to American markets.

"Even after years of having our products placed everywhere from Costco to Neiman Marcus, Aid To Artisans is still a well-kept secret," says Aid to Artisans gay board member Keith Recker. "These events are often fantastic ways for non-profits to get new donations and get new donors on board."

FFP was given a recent boost when designer Donna Karan hosted the group at Super Saturday, a designer "garage sale" in the Hamptons that raises money for the fight against ovarian cancer. There, they received confirmation that they had achieved one of their main objectives.

"One of the biggest compliments we got was that we didn't look non-profit at all," says gay co-founder Dumlao. "FFP tries for consumer empowerment, but we also try to challenge the consumer. All our campaign materials speak to people who respond to [the language of the fashion industry,] the conventions of Vogue."

WHILE D.C. FASHION WEEK might not sound as altruistic as FFP, the annual event still broadens the perspective of fashion mavens. Taking place from Sept. 23-30, the non-profit show's main objective is giving diverse up-and-coming designers an affordable chance to gain the exposure usually associated with more prestigious fashion weeks like New York and Paris.

"Since we're the nation's capital, our emphasis is on promoting international fashion and trying to make Washington a center for world fashion," says director Ean Williams. "Each fashion week we have new countries that participate. It teaches me, as well as the other organizers, about fashion from around the world. Some of the



Organizers of Fashion Fights Poverty and D.C. Fashion Week say that fashion can be used to raise awareness about social issues. (Blade photo by Henry Linser)

MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR
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MORE INFO

D.C. Fashion Week

Sept. 23-30
Locations vary
www.dcfashionweek.org

Fashion Fights Poverty

Friday, Oct. 26, 6-10 p.m.
Carnegie Library
801 K St., NW
www.sinpr.com/ffp

Runway Africa 2007

Saturday, Sept. 15, 8 p.m.
Embassy of France
4101 Reservoir Road, NW
Ticket prices vary
www.runwayafrica.com

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things we see influence American fashion. It can make its way into the average American's closet."

D.C. Fashion Week charges designers a \$400 entrance fee, a price tag that includes lighting, models and publicity. The presence of many D.C. media outlets and high-profile audience members — including senators, ambassadors and local athletes — gives the designers some serious exposure. Buyers attend the event as well, and participating designers have previously been given contracts with companies like Saks, Bloomingdales and FUBU.

"I didn't have \$100,000 to do a show in New York," says Williams, who got his start as a model and designer. "I thought there had to be a better way, and then came the birth of [D.C.] Fashion Week. A lot of other designers desired to do the same thing, to build a following locally and hopefully [make it] a launching pad for them to do things nationally and globally."

Another organization working within the fashion industry to create social change is Runway Africa (www.RunwayAfrica.com), which throws its first "Africhic Fashion Show" at the Embassy of France on Sept. 15. The show brings in

five international, Africa-inspired designers, and each will design and auction off an original outfit. The proceeds will go to Keep A Child Alive, a non-profit that provides drug treatments to African children and families living with HIV and AIDS.

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