

Local fashion designer wins award at New York Pet Fashion Show



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Careful attention to detail and a passion for elegant materials are two of local fashion designer Rebecca Bissi's signature attributes. When paired with her creative talents and her love for dogs, they earned Bissi the title of Designer of the Year at the 2015 New York Pet Fashion Show in New York City.

The annual show — which takes place in February during New York Fashion Week — is a philanthropic event that supports the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals, a nonprofit coalition of more than 150 animal rescue groups and shelters. And Bissi — who owns and operates a luxury fashion wear business for dogs, Chien Coature (www.chiencoature.com) — began designing runway outfits for participating dogs and their owners a few years ago.

While her previous Pet Fashion Show entries were certainly gorgeous and expertly executed, it was this year's trio of Sonny-and-Cher-style outfits that caught the judges' attention.

Commissioned and modeled by Gena and Jake

Oddo and their 4-year-old white Pomeranian, Sophia, they fit the show's 2015 theme of "A Rescue Revolution: Peace, Love and Animal Rescue."

Designs were supposed to reflect the fashion, music and attitude of the 1960s and 1970s. And Bissi's mirrored tops and sparkling bell bottoms — made of the finest fabrics, adorned with Swarovski crystals — fit the bill.

Local connections

Bissi, who has degrees in fashion design and textiles from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Georgia, respectively, said the inspiration for her winning designs came from a mirrored dress created by fashion designer Paco Rabanne in 1966. She also credited local Wisconsin vendors in helping her earn her title. Racine's Greene Glass, for example, cut hundreds of circular Plexiglas mirrors to her specifications; and Amanda Paffrath, of Downtown's Funky Hannah's Beads & Art, is Bissi's go-to source for bead knowledge.

"Amanda knows so much," said Bissi, an energetic 60-year-old. "In fact, her bead store is why I'm in this business," she said, explaining that it was a beading class she took at Funky

Hannah's that inspired her interest in Swarovski crystals, another of her design signatures.

She also expressed her appreciation for Racine's Woofdorf Astoria Dog Hotel & Day Spa, the doggie daycare facility that cared for her own beloved pooch, Nina, while she put in 12-hour days sewing crystals onto fabric and linking mirrors together with argenticum connector rings.

'Sheer genius'

Gena Oddo, who modeled the Cher outfit and carried Sophia down the runway at the New York Pet Fashion Show, called Bissi's idea for the winning designs "sheer genius."

The designs not only represented the era "with an air of elegance," but maintained Bissi's signature quality and attention to detail, said Oddo, who is from the coastal area of Mississippi. The outfits, she said, also "fit to perfection, for each of us."

Oddo said she also appreciates Bissi's understanding that dog coats need to be safe and soft, as well as beautiful. "Safety is my first factor and I found an artist who understands that all of those elements can be combined together."

The show judges, apparently, shared Oddo's enthusiasm for Bissi's designs. And they weren't the only ones who felt that way.

Oddo said she felt "a room filled with celebration and warm support" for Bissi's creations as she, Sophia and Jake made their way down the runway.

"We were so honored to be in the company of so many fine people who collectively came together, with their eyes focused on this renowned event that supports pets in shelters who need love, hope, and supplies to get them healthy for their new families."

Wearing the winning designs on the runway, she said, was "icing on the cake."

When asked what she feels distinguishes her designer dog wear from others, Bissi said part of it is the effort she puts into making each piece. All of her work is done by hand and she makes great efforts to find just the right materials for each project.

The mother of two grown girls is proud of the business she has built, working out of her Racine basement. Chien Coature started out as a mostly wholesale operation, with customers in Russia, Germany and Spain, and now almost exclusively produces custom work sold directly to clients in the U.S., she said.

Bissi also said she feels fortunate to have been able to pursue her passion through Chien Coature, and said she wouldn't have been able to do it without the support of her husband, Joshua Bloom, a local pulmonologist.

Online

To see Rebecca Bissi's winning designs, as modeled at the 2015 New York Pet Fashion Show, go to <http://bit.ly/1FSpdAA>. Photos of Bissi's designs are near the bottom of the page.