Designing change

‘Take that leap and just do it!’

Her love of good style led Sydney’s GEMMA SACCASAN, 50, back to school to follow her passion for fashion. Erin Holohan reports

Gemma Saccasan struggles to describe her own style, but happily admits she prefers dressing up every day.

“It springs from the philosophy that what you wear is (sending) a message to other people,” Gemma, 50, explains. “When you see someone dressed nicely it makes you feel good.”

The mother of five and now grandmother has always loved fashion, at one stage even running her own image consulting business. But it wasn’t until Gemma’s children—now aged between 15 and 30—had grown that she knew it was time to pursue her dream of becoming a fashion designer.

However, the decision to return to study did not come easily.

“It was a big leap and it took a lot of confidence,” she says. “But I didn’t want to end up regretting that I hadn’t tried in 20 years time.”

And she’s certainly far from regret.

The midwifery Sydney graduate graduated from the prestigious Raffles College of Design and Commerce in North Sydney late last year with a degree in fashion design.

Gemma enjoyed studying, had a great rapport with her teachers and couldn’t be happier with her newfound skills. Although the course involved many history and research subjects, Gemma’s favourite part was the practical aspects—learning pattern making, styling, designing and drawing techniques.

“I’ve always been into designing clothes so I really thought I needed to learn.”

Her drive to make her dreams a reality came, in part, from her desire to help other women. She hopes her designs, dedicated to the more mature woman, will provide a more sophisticated option in the Australian market.

“I was inspired by my philosophy of beauty and elegance with a twist of glamour,” she says. “I find that difficult to find.”

And she also hopes her clothing can contribute to a less sexualised view of females in today’s society.

“We’re not just body parts,” she says. “I think if I can make a difference in this world—and these are the talents I have been given—then I need to make use of them.”

Gemma had the opportunity to showcase her debut collection of seven pieces at Raffles’ end-of-year graduate show, held at Luna Park, in December last year. Her collection, entitled Titanium, was a meditation on the themes of war and peace, and was influenced heavily by the works of artists such as Matisse and Picasso—both of whom were pacifists.

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PROJECT RUNWAY

Gemma aims to use her newly acquired skills to create pieces for the elegant, mature woman.

Both excited and nervous to share her work on the night, Gemma was grateful to have her good family cheering her on. She was even more thrilled to be presented with a special honour—the Excellence in Major Project award.

While admitting that it wasn’t easy being the only mature-aged student in the course, her advice to other women considering a return to study is simple:

“Take that leap, be very organised and know that nothing happens without hard work.”

And if it starts to feel like it’s all getting too hard, Gemma says you should keep believing in your goal and know that achieving it will make you happier than ever.

“Hold your eyes and just do it,” she says with a laugh.

“Everyone’s personal stylist is now looking forward to getting some hands-on experience through her design internship, and would love to work with renowned Australian designers such as South African-born Carl Kapp—who’s designs have been worn by local stars including Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman and Miranda Otto.

In the meantime, her biggest test will come later this year when she’ll design a formal dress for one of her toughest critics—her daughter.

Inspired by her favourite iconic designers such as Carolina Herrera and the late Oscar de la Renta, Gemma hopes she can give back to women her age and encourage them to continue their love of fashion.

‘I’d really like to help fill a gap in the market,’ she says. ‘Just because you’re older doesn’t mean you can’t be fashionable and on trend.’

With her obvious and enviable sense of style, Gemma is certainly setting the best example she can.

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