

BUSINESS MONDAY OCTOBER 23, 2016 7:00 PM

As Miami's vibrant fashion industry grows, a look at the pioneers who shaped it



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Special to the Miami Herald

The enthusiasm is electric inside the new Miami Fashion Institute at Miami Dade College's downtown Wolfson Campus. In between classes, students are gathered in the airy, open foyer of the building's sixth floor with rows of sewing machines behind them and clusters of mannequins draped in bright fabric.

The light pours in from big picture windows and there's talk of dream jobs: interning at Vogue, visual styling at Bergdorf Goodman, becoming a buyer at Saks. Students swap stories about designers who inspire them: Jeremy Scott, Marc Jacobs, Stella Jean, Zuhair Murad, Olivier Rousteing of Balmain.

“The environment when you walk in, it’s just like, you want to be here,” says Kiana Dur’ant, 20, from Kendall. “It’s an eye-opener. I’m doing stuff that I never even dreamed about doing.”

ADVERTISING



“I saw a poster [at the Kendall campus] that said fashion design and merchandising and my heart literally just went, ‘Oh my God!’ And I was like, I need to sign up for this right now,” says Estefania Delgado, 19, also from Kendall. “This has been the greatest move I’ve ever done in my whole entire life.”

The young women have become fast friends over their love of fashion, each dressed in boxy, distressed dark denim jackets. “Both of us want to move to New York and go to FIT,” Delgado says, referring to the Fashion Institute of Technology, part of New York’s state university system.

They’re members of the inaugural class of 100 students at MFI, a two-year associate degree program with tracks in fashion design and merchandising. The program was created as a direct response to the needs of Miami’s local fashion industry by consulting with designers, retailers, factory managers and fashion schools to develop the curriculum. The program’s board of advisers consists of 15 industry heavyweights chaired by Naeem Khan, who is moving his eponymous fashion line from New York to a facility on the Miami River by late 2018.

“One of the things that’s missing in Miami is the ecosystem, the educational infrastructure that will strengthen and develop a skilled workforce that the industry needs,” says Marimar Molinary, director of academic program development at MDC. Some of these basic skills include construction, pattern making and sewing.

According to Molinary, MFI is the only public higher education institution in Florida offering a program of its kind, creating an unprecedented affordable option for students with a price tag of about \$8,000 total for two years.

In Miami, MFI joins the private International University of Art & Design, whose fashion program is helmed by 40-year industry veteran Charlene Parsons. Founded in 1955, it was originally called the International Fine Arts College and started with a small program in fashion merchandising. It eventually added interior design and fashion design to its programming, and in 2001 it was sold to the Art Institute. Parsons has been with the college through the changes, and today the school offers bachelor's degrees in fashion design and fashion merchandising, as well as an associate degree in accessories design with a student body of 650.



MFI student Shirley Metellus, 18, makes a pattern. AL DIAZ / adiaz@miamiherald.com

Miami's rich history in fashion and apparel started in the 1950s and '60s when Wynwood, Hialeah and Allapattah were filled with manufacturing warehouses. Major department stores like Burdines, Jordan Marsh, Jefferson Ward, Jackson Byrons (which eventually became J. Byrons) and Richards dotted downtown. National retailers like Sears and JCPenney had offices here, providing local apparel lines manufactured in Miami access to wide distribution. Some of the major brands included Suave Shoes, D'Accord, Twins Swim, Cover Girl and Tail.

Much of Miami's fashion golden era can be attributed to the influx of Cuban refugees in Miami. "Tens of thousands of Cuban women came to Miami with experience in apparel. They were pattern makers and sewers," says George Feldenkreis, founder and executive chairman of Perry Ellis International, who came to Miami from Cuba in 1961. "Latins propelled the boom in Miami's garment industry in Wynwood and Hialeah because the labor force from Americans was not there."

The industry fell into sharp decline in the mid-1990s in large part due to globalization and new technology with cheaper labor available offshore and open trade agreements. "The economy changed," Parsons says. "The Omni Mall, which was very high end, closed. Other retailers closed. People were leaving. The designers left and manufacturing stopped."

The U.S. textile and apparel workforce was hit hard, dropping from 2.4 million workers in 1973 to 1.5 million in 1996, a decline of 39 percent, according to the Department of Labor.

In Miami, this left a challenging landscape for new designers, especially with the labor intensive and essential skill of sewing in short supply. "A lot of the skills needed to make garments have disappeared," Feldenkreis says. "There are very few people that know how to make apparel. It's an art. Those people have disappeared."

Despite these challenges, successful, enduring Miami designers have emerged, including Rene Ruiz, Silvia Tcherassi, Mayda Cisneros and Julian Chang, all of whom serve on MFI's advisory board. Still, more young designers are breaking into the industry every day and thriving. These include companies like Eberjey, Alexis, Del Toro, Miansai, Style Mafia and Bammies.

Today, Miami's fashion industry is buoyed by events like Fashion Week Swim and Funkshion Fashion Week, as well as a salient swim, bridal and accessories industry. It's one of the few metropolitan areas where retail is growing, thanks to developments like the Design District and Brickell City Centre. There are also law firms like Foley & Lardner LLP dedicated to the fashion industry and professional networking organizations like Fashion Group International.

According to the Beacon Council, the creative design industry in Miami, of which fashion is a niche sector, employs 24,075 people at 3,512 companies with an economic impact of \$1.1 billion.

In recent years, the local industry has seen a pivot away from overseas manufacturing with a desire for "Made in Miami" products, evidenced by an uptick of brands headquartered in Miami with both retail storefronts and manufacturing facilities — and these businesses want to grow.

"It represents a true industry cluster," says Pamela Fuertes-Berti, vice president of international economic development programs at The Beacon Council. "We have everything here: manufacturing, sourcing, distribution, warehouse, styling, development. It's not just one aspect. Brands want to have their whole team close by, so everything is interconnected."

“The industry is poised to flourish,” Molinary says. “You have the world looking at Miami. It’s young, vibrant, creative, cosmopolitan and international. With all of this energy happening at this time, what we’ve heard from the industry is that in order for it to grow, we need an educational infrastructure or it won’t be able to reach its full potential.”

And to understand its potential, it’s wise to examine its history. Here’s a look at some of the pioneers of Miami’s fashion and apparel industry. For decades they’ve endured a fluctuating economy and the industry’s shifting landscape by seizing opportunities, diversifying products, recalibrating strategies, carving out a niche and reinventing themselves. Their leaders have demonstrated a sharp understanding of the industry with an eye towards future trends and have made vital adjustments along the way allowing them to endure and thrive.

A mother-daughter story

The story of Miami’s fashion and apparel industry is, much like the city itself, a story of human migration and family. Maria “Marita” Srebnick’s parents arrived in Cuba in 1923, Jews fleeing Eastern Europe’s pogroms, her father from Poland and her mother from the Ukraine.

“How did they end up in Cuba? You had to have money to go to Mexico and more money to go to the U.S. If you had no money, you were left in Havana,” says Srebnick, 76.

Her mother, Sofia, built a warehouse and factory in Havana making zippers, manufacturing machines and dying undergarments that she exported to South America. It was March 1960 when the government put a Soviet flag on top of her building. “She went up with a pair of scissors and cut it down,” Srebnick recalls. “My father could smell communism coming.” Soon after, Cuba’s new regime froze every account and confiscated the business.

The family eventually reunited in New York City in 1962 where Sofia went to work as a floor lady at a zipper factory and Srebnick’s father, Jaime, worked in a warehouse.

In 1966, with \$6,000 saved between the two of them, Marita and Sofia moved to Miami and opened Scott Notions. Specializing in zipper assembly and distribution, their first customer was Sportailor, a Cuban-owned Miami apparel company still in business today, with a purchase order for \$72 in zippers.



Marita Srebnick, owner of Scott Notions, checks on some zippers just out of the product line. This is a 50 year old family business founded by her Mother after leaving Cuba and returning from New York in the seventieth in Wynwood on Tuesday October 18, 2016. PEDRO PORTAL / pportal@miamiherald.com

In 1976, The YKK Group, a Japanese company with U.S. headquarters in Macon, Georgia, group of manufacturing companies that is the world's largest zipper manufacturer, approached their operation and Scott Notions became the company's first assembler. That's when Srebnick's cousin Ben Horenstein joined the business handling sales.

When Scott Notions started out, there were five competitors in Miami making zippers. Srebnick's partnership with YKK, whose zippers went on to monopolize the industry, played a vital role in pushing Scott Notions to the top. In the 1980s, their competitors began going out of business.

Levi's came calling in 1986 and Srebnick answered by flying to their headquarters in San Francisco the next morning. "I tell my children that when I went to Levi's Plaza, there's a beautiful restaurant called Il Fornaio for breakfast. I sat there and looked at the Levi's building and started to cry. I said how did I

come to be here? A Cuban refugee with no money and I'm going to be a supplier to Levi's?" With a wry, matter-of-fact smile, she adds, "And we were."

Scott Notions supplied Levi's with YKK zippers for a decade, making \$10 million annually in sales at its height. In 1996, the industry took a sharp downturn as manufacturing and production migrated overseas and companies like Levi's followed.

To stay afloat, Srebnick diversified, becoming a one-stop shop for all products catering to the apparel industry. As companies went out of business, she took on their products. She now supplies everything from elastic, thread, buttons, poly bags and hangers in addition to zippers to about 200 clients.

"Do we sell a lot? No. But we survive," Srebnick says.

They've maintained a competitive edge by being one of the only operations to assemble jacket zippers with a machine that Sofia bought in 1978, and to this day, jacket zippers comprise 80 percent of their zipper orders. They've also stayed nimble by developing a program to supply home sewing and arts and crafts operations in the Caribbean with smaller quantities of thread and elastic.

So what keeps Srebnick's passion for the business alive as Scott Notions celebrates its 50th anniversary this month? She says, "I love coming here everyday because my mom started it."

Carving a niche

Originally from Cuba, Richard Behar's father, Simon, moved to New York in the 1950s, where he spent 20 years as an executive at a fabric company. He moved to Miami in 1972 to launch Colorama Fashions, specializing in women's wear.

In 1988, Richard founded Capitol Clothing Corporation with the help of his father. Initially, his brand Little Baron produced fashionable coordinated sets for boys, which was a void in the children's wear market. They also had a secondary line of novelty uniforms in a variety of themes, including park ranger, police officer, firefighter, boat captain, safari and military outfits, but this was a smaller segment of the company.

Their first break came a year into business when a buyer for the Army/Airforce Exchange placed a large order, distributing their clothing line to military bases in the U.S. and abroad.

In 1991, Behar met a buyer from the San Diego Zoo at a trade show in Las Vegas who requested he create a junior zookeeper uniform. "Since then, they've been one of our best accounts," he says.

Starting in 2000, Behar noticed that many "mom and pop" children's retail stores were going out of business and the showrooms catering to the industry were disappearing. "It was time to refocus the direction of the company for continued growth," he says. That's when their novelty uniforms became a profitable niche.

Today, they're distributed to 300 retailers, including the Grand Canyon and Everglades National Park in large part through Eastern National, a concessionaire company with more than 100 gift shops at National Parks and museums. Their products are also distributed to Law Enforcement Uniform and Army Navy stores.

"It's a segment that's really grown for us," Behar says. "Because each style has its own unique theme, each has its own market."



Richard Behar, right, founded Capitol Clothing Corporation with the help of his father, Simon, at left, who passed away about 2 1/2 years after this photo was taken in October 2008. The company's Little Baron brand produces novelty uniforms for kids. PETER ANDREW BOSCH/ MIAMI HERALD FILE

They also have celebrity fans with the children of the late Michael Jackson, John Travolta and David and Victoria Beckham sporting Little Baron uniforms.

Through a shifting economy where many of his competitors went out of business due to manufacturing moving overseas, Behar has managed to use American-made fabric and keep the company's manufacturing local. Their apparel is cut on-site in their Allapattah warehouse and sent out to sewing

shops in Hialeah. “Our customers love the idea that our products are ‘Made in USA.’ It adds perceived value for the consumer,” Behar says. “We have very strict quality control with all the sewing shops that work for us. The garments are then sent back to our location to be coordinated as sets and shipped out.”

In the end, children’s fashion has kept Behar young at heart. “I love the business. It’s like my hobby,” he says. “It’s fun making children’s wear.”

A fashion family incubates new talent

If necessity is the mother of invention, then reinvention is the key to longevity in Miami’s fashion and apparel business. No one understands this better than Andy Varat, whose family has been in the industry for four generations. With his family’s origins in Russia, his father, Morton, moved from New York to Miami in 1950 to found Cover Girl, a successful, publicly held women’s wear brand that he ran until 1972 when he retired the line.

In 1968, during Cover Girl’s tenure, Morton built a 36,000-square-foot facility with warehouse and office space at 3300 NW 41st Street that would also become the headquarters of Tail, founded by Andy and his sister Cheryl Singer in 1974. The fashionable women’s active-wear line grew to become the leading brand in golf and tennis with \$26 million in sales at its peak. Varat and Singer sold Tail in 2008 and kept the facilities.

Today, the building is something of a fashion incubator, home to eight independent businesses including a cutting service and sewing house run by Tony Fernandez and Florence Kemper, respectively, who have worked with the Varats since the early days. Many of the apparel businesses, A’Nue Ligne, Top Secret Society, Lucky in Love and Louis at Home, are helmed by members of the Varat family.

“It’s a wonderful family business,” says Lois Varat, Andy’s sister, who founded A’Nue Ligne, an elevated women’s basics line, with her daughter Jodi Bondy in 1991. “It works well. We’re independent, but we’re there for each other.”

The building’s most high-profile tenant is lingerie and loungewear line Eberjey, whose operations occupy about three-quarters of the space. Founded by Mariela Rovito and Ali Mejia in 1996, the brand has developed a cult following and is found in 1,400 specialty stores worldwide, 25 top tier department stores and at three flagship boutiques between Miami and Newport Beach, California, with a fourth opening in December in New York City.

“The building was set up for this kind of business already, so it made a lot of sense for us,” says Rovito of moving Eberjey’s headquarters to the 3300 Building in 2009 when their need for space tripled. “It has sufficient office space in the front with warehouse space in the back, which is actually really hard to find.”

While Varat no longer operates a fashion line himself, he’s become a generous consultant and underwriter of emerging designers and businesses, most recently hosting German designer Jens Werner, who collaborated with Shake-A-Leg to create avant-garde designs out of old ship sails to raise money for

the nonprofit dedicated to teaching the disabled and underserved communities how to sail. (Werner's line will debut at Shake-A-Leg's 25th Anniversary Art of Sail event on Saturday at 7 p.m. at the Historic Coast Guard Hangar in Coconut Grove with tickets available for \$300.)

"Personally, I'm smart," quips Varat. "I'm out of the business. I just help people try to become successful."

The brand blockbuster

Before Perry Ellis International became a \$900 million global fashion titan, it started with a penniless Cuban refugee who came to Miami in 1961 at age 26 with nothing. "I originally sold window glass to cruise boats," says George Feldenkreis, founder and executive chairman of PEI, of his first job in Miami.

It was 1967 when he and his brother Herman founded Supreme International, an apparel line of school uniforms and guayabera shirts sold at Sears, JCPenney and Burdines.

Even as Miami's manufacturing and retail industry boomed in the 1970s, Feldenkreis' approach was global, importing goods from Japan at competitive prices. "The local industry here was based upon a specialty store mentality, very small," says Oscar Feldenkreis, George's son who joined the business in 1980 and now serves as CEO and president of PEI. "Most people that had factories worried more about factories and production than going overseas and trying to produce the same product at cheaper price points. It was challenging in those days if you didn't have a niche or a brand or an opportunity to go into a customer. The challenge was [other companies] were not able to evolve."

In 1980, Supreme International introduced Feldini, a fashion-forward men's wear brand, to the market. A year later, the company reached \$5 million in annual revenues and in 1993 it went public on the NASDAQ stock exchange.

This marked a period of aggressive acquisition and licensing of brands, which would separate their company from the pack not only locally, but worldwide. "I was very fixed in getting brands because I felt that was the only way we'd be able to sell big quantities," George Feldenkreis says. "You needed brands: a product that the consumer knows is fashionable, but every time you buy it there is continuity in the fit and the quality. That's what allowed us to get into department stores."

In 1999, Supreme International acquired men's wear brand Perry Ellis and changed its name to Perry Ellis International. Today, PEI is composed of 16 brands, including Original Penguin, Cubavera, Nike Swim, Callaway Golf and Laundry by Shelli Segal.

It was George's acuity in forecasting the industry's evolution that led to the company's overwhelming growth, while competitors stayed small and eventually went out of business.

Today, PEI continues to look to the future of consumer buying habits and the disruptive nature of the internet, social media and new technology. To that end, they've invested in their e-commerce talent and built an in-house, dual bay photography studio at their headquarters in Doral, which allows them to instantaneously push product online to their websites and Amazon.

“It’s not only about the capacity to make garments anymore,” George says. “It’s also about the capacity to create fashion and sales on a direct basis to the consumer. That’s going to be critical to the future. You need the capabilities in computers and new sciences to be able to reach those consumers in the United States and all over the world.” Oscar adds, “Mobility is the future of the industry and it’s growing faster and faster.”

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SCOTT NOTIONS

Founded: 1966

Owner: Marita Srebnick, 76

Employees: 10

Annual revenues: \$4 million for fiscal year 2016

Location: 545 NW 26th St., Miami

About: Scott Notions carries products catering to the apparel, shoe and handbag industries, including zippers, thread, elastic, poly bags, hangers and more.

Contact: 305-576-3328; scottnotions.com, sn@scottnotions.com

CAPITOL CLOTHING CORPORATION

Founded: 1988

Owner: Richard Behar, 55

Employees: Seven (five full time, two part time)

Annual revenues: \$4.2 million estimated for fiscal year 2017

Location: 2106 NW 22nd Court

About: Capitol Clothing Corp. creates boys novelty uniforms distributed to 300 gift shops and retailers in the U.S.

Contact: 305-576-5246

3300 BUILDING

Founded: 1968

Owner: Andy Varat, 64

Employees: Incubator housing eight independent businesses with 100-plus employees overall

Annual revenues: Estimated \$30+ million combined for fiscal year 2016

Location: 3300 NW 41st St.

About: Andy Varat has converted his family's longtime warehouse facilities into an incubator with eight independent fashion businesses operating under one roof.

Contact: Andy.Varat@gmail.com

EDUCATION IN FASHION

Among the offerings in Miami-Dade:

Miami Dade College

MDC has launched a new degree program that will help stimulate the growth of the fashion industry in Miami. Housed under the newly formed Miami Fashion Institute, its two-year associate's degree program in fashion design and merchandising is being launched this semester. www.mdc.edu/fashiondesign. At MDC's Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami.

Miami International University of Art & Design

Locally, Miami International University of Art & Design, part of the Arts Institutes, offers associate's and bachelor's degree programs in fashion design and fashion marketing, but at a higher cost. www.artinstitutes.edu/miami (click on fashion). At 1501 Biscayne Blvd., Suite 100, Miami.

PERRY ELLIS INTERNATIONAL

Founded: 1961

Owner: Publicly held/ George Feldenkreis, 81, chairman and founder/ Oscar Feldenkreis, 56, CEO and president

Employees: 2,700 corporate and retail associates

Annual revenues: \$900 million for fiscal year 2016

Location: 3000 NW 107th Ave., Doral

About: Perry Ellis International is one of the country's largest fashion corporations with 16 brands across men's, women's and sports apparel.

Contact: 305-592-2830; perry.com



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