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Mom, daughter put designs on formal fashion line

By Erin Crawford: Register Staff Writer

In an era where few people make their own clothes, Des Moines dressmaker Faythe Dornink has made a career out of custom dressmaking and tailoring.

Last May, she and her daughter Sarah, 26, embarked on a venture that, considering its locations, is even more unusually than handmade dresses.

The Dorninks launched a clothing line. The name says it all: Dornink Des Moines-New York.

No, that's not a misprint.

The spring 2005 line of formal and semiformal dresses marks the collection's debut, and shows a flair for mixing fabric textures and long, figure-flattering lines.

"Sarah has always been inspired by lines," Faythe said. "I've always been inspired by fabrics."

Most designers go to large metropolitan areas, first and foremost New York City, to do their work.

Sarah returned from the Big Apple, where she resides, to work with Faythe on the line. Deciding to work with her mom was a natural move for Sarah, considering how well their talents complement one another.

Sarah is a graduate of the New York Fashion Institute of Technology, and acclaimed and exclusive training ground for some of the top designers in the business. She already designs for several clothing lines.

Faythe, a custom dressmaker with 23 years of experience, has a precise understanding of fit, how clothes look on different body types, and is skilled at creating garments.

"Sarah's always wanted to have a line of her designs," Faythe said. "I've never thought in those terms."

About a year ago, the women decided to partner on the venture. In May, the real fun started.

"You're very restricted when you're working for a client," Sarah said. "You think about their body, their coloring."

For the Dornink line, she could create the dress she wanted, knowing it would be right for some customers.

"I was going for 40 designs in my head," she said. "From there, I whittled it down to 20. We made 13 dresses."

Sarah created the patterns. Her mother constructed them.

"I have an eye for saying, "We'll have trouble with that on a certain size bust or hip," Fayther said.

"Or we don't want puffiness here," Sarah added.

The final line will be produced in New York, and the women will sell their wares on a Web site, www.dornink.com. They also hope to offer the dresses in some local boutiques.

Even with nothing on store racks, they had their first sign the venture could work.

Faythe was at an event in Iowa City. She set up a dress in the window, the line's signature piece: a white Duchess satin wedding dress. It's a simple, strapless, body-skimming formal dress, made more complex by wide bands of fabric with contrasting shine. If created in a colored fabric, the dress would be elegant evening wear.

"The play on fabric catches the light," Sarah said.

Before long, the women were stopping in to inquire about the dress. At each compliment, Faythe would grab the phone and call her daughter.

"The response was wonderful," Faythe said.

"I got 10 calls about it that day," Sarah said.

What that showing in Iowa City signals – and what Faythe and Sarah are hoping – is that they can tap into an underserved market for women in Iowa.

"We hear from a lot of people that you can't find a great mother-of-the-bride dress," Sarah said.

Others involved in the area's fashion industry agree with that appraisal.

"I really think there's a need for it in the Des Moines market," said Cindy Marshall, an instructor at Des Moines Area Community College who coordinates the school's fashion design program.

K. Michelle has 22 years of experience in the clothing retail and design in Des Moines. She can't think of anyone else designing dresses in Des Moines. However, she thinks that's all the more reason why the Dorninks could succeed in the market.

"I think there's great demand out there, mother-of-the-bride, those specialty items that are hard to find because not everyone carries that," she said. "There's a big gap and they should do very well. We don't have any place that specializes just in that area they're doing – specialty dresses. It's hard to find that particular look.

The Dorninks say mothers-of-the-bride often have to seek out a dress in a specific color. When they find that shade, it may not be attached to the type of dress they hoped for.

Dornink formalwear will come in a variety of colors, and the dresses aim to flatter women's figures.

One of Sarah's favorite pieces in the new collection is a strapless black cocktail dress that gathers at the bust. A straight line of fabric runs down the front of the dress.

"If you're straight up and down, this makes you curvier," Sarah said.

Another dress, which they've created a model of in hot pink, is a tea-length halter gown, with a double curve of shiny stripes that races past a woman's hip, accentuating a feminine silhouette.

For the fall collection, the Dorninks plan to refine the best dresses from the spring collection and re-create them in fall colors. The line may eventually expand beyond into less-formal clothing.