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A perfect fit for Vancouver Fashion Week

Showcase for designers' spring collections helps get important health message to young women

BY LAURA BAZIUK, THE PROVINCE SEPTEMBER 20, 2010

STORY PHOTOS (1)



Vancouver Fashion Week producer Jamal Abdourahman (far left) and Ryan Pugsley, marketing manager of Kersh, one of the labels to be featured during Vancouver Fashion Week, meet with models during preparations for the event.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PNG

One day at work, a friend of Cynthia Lui's casually said that she and her colleagues should check themselves for breast cancer. So when she was taking a shower later that day, the 26-year-old examined her breasts.

"It's weird because I was in my mid-20s, which is way earlier . . . than when most people get breast cancer," said Lui, who had never worried about the disease and had no family history of breast cancer. "I found a small little lump, and then it went from there."

She was diagnosed with the disease within days and underwent hours of gruelling chemotherapy treatments during the following year.

Five years later, Lui is a survivor and is set to sashay down the runway during Vancouver Fashion Week, which will attract stylists, buyers and journalists from around the world when it launches Nov. 3.

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She and other breast cancer survivors will model outfits by several of Vancouver Fashion Week's featured designers as part of the event's new partnership with the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation.

The fashion showcase is serving as a launchpad for the foundation's new self-examination campaign for young women, which Lui supports wholeheartedly.

"My surgeons and my oncologist . . . told me how lucky I was because [the lump] was the size of a small pea," she said. "I call that friend my guardian angel."

The Breast Cancer Foundation's campaign, Don't Forget to Check, is aimed at women 18 to 25 years old, said Janet Mitchell, spokesperson for the organization's BC/Yukon region.

Mammograms are recommended for women over 40, but younger females out there are wondering if they should do anything to prevent the onset of breast cancer, she said.

"We've seen a gap, a need out there for information," Mitchell said. "That kind of information seems to have, in a way over the past few years, fallen off the map."

What better place to launch the campaign than Vancouver's premiere fashion exhibit, where thousands of people — mostly style-savvy young women — will preview the 2011 spring collections of more than 40 of the industry's best aspiring and established designers,

"It's truly an honour," Vancouver Fashion Week producer Jamal Abdourahman said of VFW's partnership with the Breast Cancer Foundation. "It's a great way to pass on this message."

Many young women are involved in Vancouver Fashion Week, he added, as spectators, volunteers, models and designers.

The Don't Forget to Check campaign also has the support of the Art Institute of Vancouver, which is sponsoring the initiative. The Art Institute is hosting its own fashion show (www.aivfashionshow.com) on Nov. 2, the eve of Vancouver Fashion Week. The show, to be held at the River Rock Casino, will feature students' work.

"Fashion is a good venue to partner up with (the campaign)," said Amy Alto, the Art Institute's marketing co-ordinator. "Our students are predominantly female [and] the fact that most are under 30 makes us a great fit to work together."

Beginning tomorrow, The Province will give readers a preview of the collections to be shown during Vancouver Fashion Week, including designs by Art Institute students, in our Designer of the Day feature, which is sponsored by the Don't Forget to Check Campaign.

Mitchell said the self-exam campaign is simple and to the point. She wants young women to know there's no wrong way to check their breasts. "It means look at them and touch them, feel them," Mitchell said. "There's no specific way you need to do it. You just need to know what looks and feels normal for you on a regular basis, and if there's any change, go see a doctor."

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The campaign's website, dontforgettocheck.ca, urges women to watch for changes in size, shape or skin texture, redness or swelling, any new lumps, knots or thickening of the breast, and any unusual pain that doesn't go away.

Most changes are benign, the website says, but it's best to know for sure, especially since early detection is so crucial in cancer treatment. (According to statistics from the Canadian Cancer Society, of the roughly 23,000 Canadian women diagnosed with breast cancer each year, 950 are under the age of 40.)

The website also has a quiz on how long it takes to check your breasts, a pledge to check them regularly, and a "boob bomb" to get your friends on Facebook in the act.

After she was diagnosed, many of Lui's friends began to regularly check themselves as well. "I'm really glad because in another five years, we're going to be in the age bracket [when breast cancer becomes more of a risk] and now everyone [will be] kind of used to it," she said.

"The more you do it, you become more experienced, you get to know your body better. I think that you have a higher chance of diagnosing yourself, almost, when you have been doing it for 10 years already."

Vancouver Fashion Week runs from Nov. 3 to 7. Schedule and venue information will be available soon at www.vanfashionweek.com and vanfashionweek.blogspot.com.

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