

Lauren aims to inspire, uplift community

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Not many businesses can attribute their launch to a bad hair day.

Yet if Ashley Lauren hadn't awakened one morning with unruly hair when she was 15, she wouldn't have started Diva Rags. That fledgling enterprise, in turn, begat Diva Rags & Suave Clothing, a South Minneapolis boutique that sells custom clothing, shoes, jewelry and related accessories.

While Lauren, now 25, says her business is profitable, counting her riches isn't her primary motivation in life. She aims to inspire others to follow their dreams and uplift the community, particularly youth.

That's why she conceived the Diva/Suave Project, a nonprofit through which she has donated hundreds of headscarves for cancer patients and others. Numerous items she sells on the for-profit side—among them, hats, tennis shoes, ties, jeans, shawls and shirts, many of which are emblazoned with “wearable glitter” and gems and inscribed with positive messages such as “Live With Purpose,” “Persevere” and “Believe”—she also gives away through the nonprofit. As part of her charitable efforts, she also teaches and inspires youngsters in after-school classes.

In part because of her community service, Lauren was selected a spring semester outstanding student at Metropolitan State University. She calls the honor “humbling and a blessing” that further fuels her philanthropic spirit.

The first thing that strikes you about Diva Rags & Suave Clothing, near the corner of Cedar Avenue South and East 42nd Street, is a small “shrine of angels” erected near the front door. This eye-level platform displays photos and memorabilia of several people Lauren admires, including Danny Davis, her grandfather, and Mark Wald, her former high school art teacher.

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Both are now deceased.

“The biggest challenge in my life has been losing these great persons,” says Lauren. “Both always inspired me to keep going. I try to keep their messages and legacy alive through this shrine.”

Another striking feature about her business: Lauren herself. She is a petite package of enthusiasm and ever-smiling positivity. She admits to sometimes behaving like a diva—hence the business’ name; a number of her girl students even call her “Miss Diva.” Keeping her grounded is her mother, Lynn Coleman—Lauren affectionately calls her “mom-ager,” for mom and manager—who often works with her at the store.

Lynn Coleman says her daughter has always been precocious and arty; for instance, her poetry was published when she was just 12. So it wasn’t necessarily surprising when the teenage Lauren, after taming her wayward hair one morning with a highly stylized gold headscarf, was immediately pestered by other students in her Minneapolis charter school to fashion similar scarves for them. Thus Diva Rags was born, initially operated out of a shoebox in her South Minneapolis bedroom.

Soon Lauren was peddling embellished headscarves, shawls and accessories at farmers markets and other community events. She branched out to include male attire—the Suave Clothing part of her company’s name—and by 2007 was working from a space at the Midtown Global Market on Lake Street. She opened her current 375-square-foot store (with basement library) at 1832 East 42nd Street in South Minneapolis in 2008.

Lauren says Diva Rags & Suave Clothing has recently entered into gift shops at high-traffic venues such as the Allina and Children’s Hospitals and Kowalski’s Markets. She’s even sold headscarves to the Harley Davidson motorcycle company in Saint Paul.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate among Blacks in Minnesota is about 22 percent, which is three times higher than for whites. That unemployment disparity is among the highest nationally. Lauren suggested one way to help reduce that rate among Blacks would be for more to launch their own enterprises.

“It can be done,” she says, “with the right resources, support and education.”

In Lauren’s case, she is grateful for attending Metropolitan State University’s First College and graduating with a self-designed major in leadership, entrepreneurship and community outreach. The First College’s spring semester outstanding student is also thankful the college enabled her to receive some credit for prior life experiences.

“I love the fact they acknowledge the worth and value of your past experiences,” she says.

Daniel Abebe, First College dean and Lauren’s advisor, called her “extremely intelligent” and an “amazing example of what a human being can and should be.” Moreover, Abebe characterized her as a “visionary” and “inspirational leader” who is a “great role model for many young people

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of color.”

Whether working for her business or nonprofit, Lauren says she is committed to making a difference in the community. She is especially interested in aiding urban youth.

At twice-weekly after-school classes at Richard Green Central Park Community School in South Minneapolis, Lauren teaches middle-schoolers, primarily girls, practical skills like cooking and exercising. She also helps them with art projects and offers tutorials on wide-ranging subjects, including hygiene, nutrition, conflict resolution, academic achievement, leadership and entrepreneurship.

“If I can be a role model by inspiring these kids and letting them know that entrepreneurship is an option for them, that would be great,” she says. “I want them to know that they can be business owners, but they need to work hard and stay focused. Whatever their interests are, I want them to value themselves and education and capitalize on their talent, because everybody has something to offer the world.”

Lauren says her future plans include continuing to expand both her business and nonprofit. Understanding the value of promotion, she'd love for entertainers and even local TV anchors to wear her customized apparel.

But she also expresses interest in studying leadership and community outreach in graduate school. Additionally, Lauren says she'd like to write self-help books aimed at addressing the needs of urban youth.

“I'd love to be known for uplifting youth in my community and keeping my grandfather's torch lit by passing on his inspirational messages,” she says. “Kids need to know they should live life with a purpose and leave the world a better place than when they found it.”

Metropolitan State University, a member of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, provides high-quality, affordable education programs for adults seeking bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. It is the only state university in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.