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City Living from the Arch to the Innerbelt

**WORD**



**Josephine Baker show at the Sheldon**

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**Milan ... Paris ... St. Louis?**

**CWE resident Amy Johnson launches line of clothing at fashion show**

**By Laura McCarthy**

These days people rarely pick one career path and stick with it until retirement. Central West End resident Amy Johnson, of KayOss Designs, has made a career out of following her gut. At 35, she has only now found her true passion — fashion design. As a former civil engineer, Johnson said she believes her multifaceted artistic background, including engineering, led her to become a designer.

St. Louis and Johnson had their first international fashion show, *Pronto*, May 12 at 555 Washington Ave. And fresh out of design school in Italy, she has only been living her dream for nine months. Johnson was one of the 10 designers in the show, with 10 outfits for her spring line, which can be viewed and purchased online at [www.kayosdesigns.com](http://www.kayosdesigns.com).

"[An event like this] is exciting. St. Louis has so much potential," Johnson said. "I loved L.A. because there is so much energy and everybody's trying to be somebody ... I don't feel that as much [in St. Louis], but it also gives you more opportunity ... You stand out more."

At the model fitting for the designers one week before the show, one would have thought Johnson has done this many times before by



Marian Brickner photo

Amy Johnson (right) adjusts a piece of clothing on Francesca Piazza. Johnson was one of 10 designers taking part in the *Pronto* fashion show May 12.

watching her arrange and coach the models and describe the makeup and music she wanted. In the middle of this couture chaos, Johnson leaned over and said, "[With] anything else, I would be stressed out," and continued fielding questions and directing traffic. She added that a small amount of modeling experience as a teenager also helped her to know what she wants for the show.

The day before the show, when one might expect stress and nervousness, Johnson laughed and said, "I've probably never been more ready for

anything in my life."

"It's all about making [women] look the way I want to look: sexy, classy ... something that people notice," Johnson said. "It's fun, it's why we like to buy clothes. We want to be noticed ... to walk into a room and have everybody want what you're wearing."

Her spring line includes a variety of textures; vibrant oranges, yellows and light pinks; and her first piece: an attention-grabbing pair of plaid pants. "It seems like you can find a million tops, but you can't always find really

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**A nostalgic musical**

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and other former political bigwigs in Atlanta, where she also carried the sign for the country of Nauru in the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympics.

When the excitement started to taper off in Atlanta, she booked a ticket and backpacked through Europe and found Italy to be her favorite European country. And after entering design school in Italy, she said, "I knew that it was what I wanted to do, but I didn't know how it was going to happen."

She said that her artistic background was already there, but her instructor in Italy, Ellena Schultz, "connected me with the fabrics," which are the starting point for many of the designs.

Even though Johnson said she has found her calling in life, she still holds down several part-time jobs because her interests are so varied.

She rents out a couple of homes in Highland, Ill., renovates and designs homes, works one day a week at Triple A Golf Course because she is an avid golfer and hopes to design a golf line in the spirit of Payne Stewart, and works for and promotes Migun of St. Louis (thermal massage beds) because she firmly believes in the healing benefits. "You never know who you are going to meet that's going to influence you on what you're going to do next," Johnson said. "I love life. I have a lot of energy, so I need a lot of things going on."

But Johnson was quick to admit that fashion is not everything. She said she wants to give something back. But first, she said she needs to find the right charities. As for now, she said she appreciates Legal Advocates for Women, which, among others, was a beneficiary of *Pronto*. "That way," Johnson said, "everyone benefits from fashion; it's not just about making you look pretty." **W**

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cool pants and skirts," Johnson said.

For Johnson the high-quality fabric is a source of inspiration.

"I walk into a store and as soon as I see the fabric, the design process starts in my head, then I start drawing," Johnson said, and added that she finds these fabrics from all over, including New York, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Florence and Milan.

Johnson learned to sew only several months ago from Vivian Shearburn, 91. She is her preacher's mother at St. John's Church in the Central West End. She said it was Shearburn who encouraged her to sew up her designs

from school.

The first pair of pants she made — her trademark red plaid pants — fit perfectly. "That was a sign," Johnson said. "I wore them out that night and people were like, 'Where'd you get those pants?'" She said that every time she wears them, someone asks about them. "That was another sign: Everyone wanted to buy them, so I thought, 'OK, I'll sell them.'"

The name of her company, KayOss, is something Johnson said she came up with several years ago. She said she liked that it could be the name of a woman, but when spoken it sounds like *chaos*, "sometimes like my life," Johnson said.

"I don't want to push this, though,"



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Johnson said. "I want it to evolve into what it's supposed to be." This more serendipitous approach to her career and her life has led Johnson all over the world: from St. Louis to Illinois and Florida, then Europe, Florence and back to St. Louis.

After graduating from the University of Illinois in 1992, Johnson and a college buddy packed up the car and found themselves living in Key West, Fla., just for fun. For the next 10 years, she skipped around different engineering and sales jobs, including one working under Andrew Young



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