

Beyond the Runway

UCity fashion-art studio encourages individual style in children

By Cathy Crenshaw Doheny | Photos by Jeff Willhelm

Hannah Montana, the Spears sisters, the Olsen twins – the very mention of these teen icons sends girls as young as 5 years old into style frenzies at their local department stores.

With each reflection in the mirror, our daughters hope to replicate the perfect images they have witnessed in magazines and on television. As parents, it's easy to play right along and whip out the MasterCard.

Style Sanctum, a new fashion-art studio located in Huntersville, defies the idealized image of fashion by providing opportunities for children to create their own individual style.

Within the context of classes, students learn about sketching the fashion figure, color theory and garment drawing. From there, they then create their own fashion portfolio and collection. Also exposed to art materials used by the world's best fashion designers, students are encouraged to take their materials home so they may continue to learn and explore.

"The diversity of how young girls are and appear in the real world is eroded on a daily basis," says Clayton Sinclair, a former senior vice president at Wachovia who founded Style Sanctum with his wife, Nicole, a fashion consultant for the past seven years.

Helping kids to find more creativity within structure is a

part of the Style Sanctum mission. While the business is "for profit," the Sinclairs believe that fostering this creativity within the community is crucial.

"At Style Sanctum we work hard to debunk the idea that the only way a young girl should look is like a teen icon or the only style she can have is found at Abercrombie," Sinclair explains. "We acknowledge that it is okay to look like one of these teen idols and to shop at Abercrombie, but we help young girls to understand that is perfectly acceptable and wonderful even if they choose to look differently."

Since its opening in April of this year, Style Sanctum has been most popular with young girls age 10-16. In fact, most of their summer classes were filled to capacity because many of the same girls decided to return week after week.

Valerie Udeh enrolled her two daughters in a Style Sanctum class. "I wanted to provide to both girls a broader sense of fashion than just what they had seen on television or the runway," she says. "I wanted them to see that fashion is about creative design, color and texture, and not just about the latest trend."

"My 10 year-old daughter, Chidera, especially has experienced an increase in self-esteem since starting the class. She has taken the lessons that Nicole Sinclair teaches to heart and has started to define her own style through the clothes that she wears. This has given her more confidence."

Style Sanctum's Saturday and home school classes aren't just for girls – boys are encouraged to participate as well. While they may not face quite the same challenges of living up to idyllic stereotypes, there is often an expectation of conformity imposed upon teenage boys.

"After following 'the rules' in school all day, boys especially like the creative freedom we give them here. This is a place where it's OK to color outside the lines," says Sinclair.

Through a partnership with University City YMCA, Style Sanctum is now participating in "Middle School Matters," a 12-week program that allows 14 students from James Martin Middle School to come to after-school classes at the studio two days each week through December.

For Nicole Sinclair, a graduate of the Parson School of Design and fashion consultant for clients like Kim Jacobs from the "Daily Balance" talk show, the mission of Style Sanctum does not end there.

"We want to encourage our students to be individual thinkers and innovative designer," says Nicole. "As an industry, our mission is to create innovative designers, so the same stereotypes and designs are not perpetuated year after year by corporate-owned design houses." | [ucm](http://ucm.com)

For more information about Style Sanctum, go to www.stylesanctum.com.



Lauren Cuck, 9, starts with fabric and a blank canvas in fashion design class at Style Sanctum.



Brianna Broadway creates a dress in class at Style Sanctum.



Style Sanctum's tips for developing your individual style

- 1 Be experimental and try things that you might not have before — clothes, stores, accessories.
- 2 Take a step at a time in experimenting with your own style. Wear a top that you wouldn't normally wear with pants that you wear consistently.
- 3 Think about the cost per wear when purchasing a piece of clothing. Just because something is inexpensive or cheap does not a bargain make. A bargain occurs when you pay money for something that you truly get wear out of.
- 4 Pick a true style icon — someone who has graced the best-dressed lists, not a pop icon. There is a difference.
- 5 Hire a professional. Style may seem like a very intuitive thing, but there are rules to putting yourself together. Fashion is definitely not brain surgery, but there is a lot more to it than can be perceived with the naked eye. Someone can always tell when you try vs. when you nail it!