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World-class fashion design in Connecticut: New England Fashion+Design Association in SoNo and coming to Hartford

SOUTH NORWALK, CT – There's no need to head into New York to learn fashion design when you soon will have two places in Connecticut.

New England Fashion+Design Association has been located in the South Norwalk Metro-North railroad station (at 25B Monroe St.) since 2006, And now, director and co-founder Irina Simeonova has announced a Fashion Lab Summer Camp, to take place June 25-Aug. 2 in Hartford (at 75 Charter Oak Ave.).

At NEF+DA, aspiring designers of all ages can learn what it takes to express themselves and create works for the runway or everyday wear, to go on to jobs in the fashion world, to launch their own businesses, or to get a world-class design background before heading to college. And the Fashion Lab Summer Camp will offer lessons in illustrating, pattern making and design.

“There are many people here who don't want to travel,” Irina said. “They're intimidated by the big city, but they desperately want to change their lives. You don't have to be in New York. We do go to New York for fabric trips and meet people. But I can give them New York here.”

Students of all ages, from children to seniors, can take a variety of programs to study fashion illustration, pattern making and sewing – learning how to transform the visions strutting in their heads and apply them to pen and ink, to fabric and to sewing machines. Along the way, they might also meet prominent guest lecturers to talk in depth about their fields of expertise.

Her emphasis is on haute couture because “Fabrics are like letters. You can't make a design if you don't know the letters. It's more important to start high and work with something upscale than it is to go down. It's better to teach them to think like a designer. It's very important to teach them to think of design.”

Irina, who also is an assistant professor at New York's renowned The New School Parsons School for Design (where she was hired by Tim Gunn of *Project Runway*

and *Make It Work* fame), launched NEF+DA after having started and run a fashion design and merchandising program at Gibbs College in both Norwalk and New York. She's an expert fashion and interior designer who created her path starting in childhood in her hometown of Sofia, Bulgaria. She began learning sewing and pattern making at 11 after discovering that the family's flower table was actually a long-unused sewing machine: "I opened it, put a little oil on it and started sewing."

Ten years later, the girl who was the first student to arrive at school each morning became head designer for Rila Style, a Sofia-based manufacturer, and won several awards along the way. She moved to the United States in 1991, and within two weeks she was hired as a designer by Mary McFadden, developing embroideries and textile designs. In 1993, she launched her own company, designing creations and selling her collections in high-end stores in the U.S. and Canada.

In 1995, she won the United Nations' International Design Competition and was given her own show to launch the UN's fall session that year. In 2000, she participated in Fashion Week in New York under her own name. Her work has also been featured on French Fashion TV.

When something becomes your passion, your life, your love – well, let Irina explain it: "I haven't worked in my life and I haven't gone to school in my life." And that approach to life works itself into the way she teaches.

"I don't teach to the classroom – I teach to the student," she said. "When I go into the classroom, it doesn't matter what number of people I have in there. These are all different characters. When people are in a group, they create one character. Each class has its own character, temperament, and ups and downs. Very often, teachers don't go beyond that point.

"I can't teach the students if I don't know who they are. I need to tailor my teaching to their own character. I get to know them in-depth. I give them different approaches to make them better – to make it work – which creates a deep relationship. What is going to happen to this person? I have to shape and support them and find their best. It's more like a custom tailoring for each person. My teaching is more than mentoring – it's not only how to make a sleeve or put on a button."

Classes are of varying lengths. To learn more about NEF+DA and its many programs in both SoNo, as well as the Fashion Lab Summer Camp in Hartford, call 203-345-0030 or go to www.sonofashiondesign.com.