Designing a Change

By HOWARD CINCOTTA and DEBORAH CONN

Photographs by BIANCA ALEXIS

Nyla Hashmi, 23, and Fatima Monkush, 25, are uncommon women with a lot in common. They grew up as best friends in Hartford, Connecticut. Both of them have Muslim fathers from South Asia and American mothers who converted to Islam.

And now, both are committed to designing chic clothing that offers women a way to dress both modestly and fashionably.

The two launched their new clothing line, called Eva Khurshid (www.evakhurshid.com), this year. Although the designers have a specific market in mind, they also hope to reach a broad base of potential customers.

"The name will be recognizable as Muslim, but any woman would look great in our clothes," says Hashmi. She describes the line as "American clothing for working women, 25 to 34 years old, with an on-the-go lifestyle."

Connecticut designers create clothes for young women that combine fashion with modesty.

Clothing dilemmas

Hashmi and Monkush first became interested in clothing design in their teens. Hashmi's family moved to Pakistan in 1995, when she was 10, although she continued to spend summers in Connecticut. (The family moved back to the United States permanently after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.)

"When we came back the summer I was 13, I went through a huge culture shock," Hashmi says. "I saw how different the Pakistani and American adolescent cultures were. My parents wanted me to start dressing more modestly, because I was growing up. I wanted to dress cool like the other kids, but there was nothing in the stores."

Monkush had a similar experience. "It was really difficult to find anything readymade that I could wear," she says. The girls often resorted to layering, "the Muslim girl's best friend," Monkush says with a laugh.

Both Hashmi and Monkush learned to sew from their mothers. "My mom taught me to follow a pattern and also to change it to create something completely different, something that was exactly what I wanted," Monkush says. "I was 16 when I started making all my own clothes. That was the summer Nyla and I set our course."

Comfort and clothes

Both women have developed their own definitions of appropriate attire. "I grew up in a very conservative home, and my parents were adamant about dressing modestly," Hashmi explains. "I eventually found my comfort zone. I will wear short sleeves, but nothing low-cut or body hugging. Everyone has their own comfort level."

Designs from Eva Khurshid's Fall 2009 collection offers both basics styles and signature looks.

Monkush's approach "is not about rules, but about what feels right," she says. "For myself, I'm not going to walk around in a tank top or a short dress—I'm just not comfortable. I do cover my hair and have since I was 14."

Growing up in a mixed family

Nyla Hashmi's mother was raised a Catholic. Her father, a Pakistani, came to the United States in the 1970s and is a U.S. citizen. "My mother was studying to be a nurse when she met my father, who's a heart surgeon. My mother was so inspired by him—he is so kind and generous—that she became interested in his religion and converted," Hashmi says.

Hashmi attended Islamic school on Sundays in Hartford, along with her three siblings.

Monkush's father is from Bangladesh. He came to the United States in 1971 to stay with a cousin in West Virginia. Monkush's mother met him while visiting a friend, and she, too, converted to Islam before the two married.

Path to the fashion world

After public high school, Monkush went to the University of Connecticut and Central Connecticut State University, where she majored in art. After graduation she moved to New York City and shared an apartment that first summer with Hashmi, who was a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Armed with a bachelor's degree from the institute, Hashmi found a job creating women's sweaters for Israeli designer Elie Tahari. Monkush, too, is working in fashion, first with Coogi, which makes hip-hop urban menswear, and then with Married to the Mob, an edgy streetwear label for women, where she is today.

Hashmi and Monkush worked in the evenings and on weekends to put together their collection. It's a struggle—Hashmi lives in Queens and Monkush lives in Brooklyn with her husband—but both women are committed to their dream.

The thought behind their clothing extended to their choice of a name. "Eva is the name of Fatima's maternal grandmother," Hashmi explained, "and Khurshid is my dad's mother's name." Like their designs, it marries the two cultures.

The Eva Khurshid line debuted in February at Coterie, a major fashion trade show in New York City.

Hashmi and Monkush aren't quitting their day jobs just yet, but they're hopeful their collection will fill a need in the industry. "We want to be the biggest and best in what we're doing," Hashmi says. "This is not like any other brand."

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SUSAN HASHMI

Nyla Hashmi (left) and Fatima Monkush.