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All The Rage

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Fashion Diary: Fifth-grade fashion designer Cecilia Cassini

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Her idol is Coco Chanel. She has a taste for vintage fabrics. She has her sights set on the runways of Paris. And she's 10.

While other children were reading "Cinderella" and watching "Dora the Explorer," Cecilia Cassini was polishing her reading skills by flipping through Lucky and Vogue, and preparing a third-grade book report on "The Devil Wears Prada." And now, what started with a birthday gift of a sewing machine has blossomed into a fledgling fashion business with the help of manager Pilar DeMann, the woman who plotted the Kardashians' path from C-level obscurity to branding juggernaut.

Cecilia, a spunky fifth-grader from Encino, is selling her collection of one-of-a-kind girls' dresses at Lifesize at Fred Segal Santa Monica, where she will have a trunk show Saturday.

Her look is homespun but sassy, with simple dresses constructed in another. The pieces are quirky

from a skirt in one fabric and a bodice — strapless or tank-style — in another. The pieces are quirky cute with sequin, fabric rosette or bow details.

Billed as "the youngest fashion designer in the country," she has already been a guest at New York Fashion Week (trailed by a German TV crew), launched a slick e-commerce site and garnered corporate sponsors and interest from several TV producers. DeMann thinks she is an ideal role model for young girls. Cecilia is a wholesome kid who doesn't want to watch TV and play video games all day. "She just wants to sew dresses and inspire other kids."

The modeling world has long put a premium on youth, with L.A.'s Gerren Taylor strutting the catwalk for the first time in 2003 at the tender age of 12. But now, the fashion industry is courting pint-size tastemakers too.



Last year, 13-year-old blogger and muse Tavi Gevinson was hired to promote the Rodarte for Target collection, while 17-year-old blogger Jane Aldridge was tapped to design shoes for Urban Outfitters. Russian designer Kira Plastinina was just 15 when her fashion empire expanded to the U.S. (and 16 when her company filed for bankruptcy protection), and Brazilian designer Pedro Lourenco just 19 when he showed his collection of high-end leather dresses on the Paris runway last October. Up next, 13-year-old Lourdes Leon and mom Madonna are designing the Material Girl line debuting at Macy's for the back-to-school season.

"The bar is so much higher today in terms of shock value," says Kit Yarrow, chairman of the department of psychology at Golden Gate University, and co-author of "Gen BuY: How Tweens, Teens and Twenty-Somethings are Revolutionizing Retail." "An 18-year-old starting a company is not that interesting anymore. Now you have to be 8 or 10 to be newsworthy and captivating."

As for the psychology behind the trend, "kids today have more influence and stature in the family and they are more empowered," Yarrow says. "When a kid gets an idea, you might imagine on an episode of 'Leave It to Beaver' that the mom would say, 'That's nice, now go out and play.' But now, a kid gets an idea, and the parents take it seriously, and ask themselves if they should help develop it."

On a recent afternoon at the Lifesize boutique, Cecilia checks herself out as she walks past a mirror. She's perfectly styled in one of her strapless dresses with a matching bow in her hair.

She sifts through a rack of her creations like an expert, pulling out a dress sewn from gold vintage Giorgio Armani fabric. "I got this at the fabric store that sponsors me, International Silks & Woolen," she says, as the 1980s bubblegum pop song "Mickey" plays in background.

Cecilia finishes her homework during school hours so she can sew in the evening. Each dress (\$62 to \$150) takes about 15 minutes to make on her Singer Confidence. (Singer is another sponsor.)

"At New York Fashion Week, what really inspired me was all the taxi cabs, so I made this," she says, referring to a gold-and-black diamond print dress with a stretchy gold jersey bodice.

Her parents are as baffled as anyone about where the young designer gets her fashion sense. "When she was a baby, before she could walk, before she could talk, she was pointing to the outfits she wanted," says mom Michelle Cassini, a yoga instructor who doesn't own a single piece of Chanel. "As soon as she could use scissors, she was turning clothes into something new."

At age 5, she cut up her older sister's Betsey Johnson dress when no one was looking, cinched it with ponytail holders, folded up the hem and taped it, customizing the design to her taste. "I have always loved fashion since I was little," Cecilia says. "I was painting my nails when I was like 2."



For her sixth birthday, she asked for a sewing machine, and she took a few lessons. "But the teacher wasn't so nice and told me something didn't match when I thought it did." The budding designer wanted total creative control.

At 7, she wrote her first letter at school to Coco Chanel. By age 8, she had designed a logo based on the Eiffel Tower. But her big break came last year at Tough Cookies, a children's shop in Sherman Oaks, where Michelle

mentioned to the owner that her daughter made dresses. That led to a trunk show where Cecilia sold 50 pieces.

Then the fashionista-in-training met DeMann through a friend. "She fell in love with me and became my manager, and things started happening," says Cecilia, who wants to have her own fashion show, stores all over the world and "to inspire little girls to follow their dreams." (DeMann is hoping for a collection at Target or another mass retailer, and a line of branded sewing machines, fabrics and patterns.)

"If the kid's creative, why not?" says Ira Mayer, publisher of the New York-based Youth Markets Alert newsletter, adding that 8- to 14-year-olds have \$43 billion in annual spending power. "Hopefully, she has a sense of what's going to happen to other people her age."

But first, she has to finish fifth grade.

"Education is still first," says Cecilia's father, Lionel Cassini, a photographer whose background is in the computer business. "At the same time, if she can start on a career path so that she already has something when she's 20, why shouldn't we encourage it?"

Cecilia Cassini trunk show, Saturday, May 1, noon to 4 p.m. at Lifesize by Ron Robinson at Fred Segal, 500 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 458-1160. RSVP at vipfriends@ceciliacassini.com.

-- Booth Moore

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Top Photo: Cecilia Cassini, 10, seen here with her designs, is having a trunk show Saturday at Lifesize in Santa Monica. Bottom photos: More examples of her work. All Credits: Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times

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