

Helping people in the world of fashion succeed

The Fashion Incubator offers resources and support for the creative type

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For Toronto entrepreneur Jas Banwait, being a resident of Toronto Fashion Incubator has offered her opportunities she wouldn't have found while running her business out of her parents' basement.

"Being here gives my business credibility," she said. "...just because my name is associated with Toronto Fashion Incubator, it gives me such a one up on other people who are working out of their basements."

The Toronto Fashion Incubator (TFI) is a non-profit organization that helps young entrepreneurs start and grow a fashion business, said Susan Langdon, executive director of TFI for the last 16 years. Langdon said any one involved in fashion - from fashion, accessory and jewelry designers to stylists and bridal consultants - can be a TFI resident. Residents get the benefit of using one of TFI's 10 in-house studios, which are leased yearly for \$275 to \$500 per month, are able to use their machinery and space, but more importantly, Langdon said receive the benefit of being surrounded by like-minded people who are there to support and mentor them.

Banwait said TFI has been a great atmosphere for her to learn. She said she receives support from other creative people and both the resources and feedback have been helpful in growing her business. "It really is what it lives up to be, it is an incubator and there is collaboration and it's just amazing," she said. Banwait's business, Savillion, provides custom-tailored suits, professional and formal, for men and women. She said the beauty of menswear and professional attire is it's not affected by trends as quickly as mainstream fashion. "Our products are very classic and made for an executive or a groom for a wedding, so basically what we do is a lot of the business side, marketing, sales and trade shows," she said.

Langdon said TFI hosts several seminars and workshops throughout the year to help with the business side of the industry, and their resource centre houses a number of expensive trend and market research information that's usually unattainable to a new business owner. "If you were just starting out, could you afford to spend \$5,000 for a trend book? The answer is no, so we have a lot of people who join to gain access to this resource that's called Promostyl, a trend forecasting service out of Paris (France)," she said.

TFI also has volunteer mentors, both in person and available online, who are specialists in several fields from public relations to accounting and from fashion buyers to designers who offer members guidance from the field. "One of our former residents, a girl named Wendy Wong, has come back to be a mentor and share her advice with the up-and-coming designers about how to break into the U.S. market," Langdon said. A former fashion designer herself who has years of experience, Langdon not only shares her expertise, but also organizes seminars and events about topics she thinks she would have wanted to know about when she was starting and growing her business. "What's unique about TFI is we feel everyone has a certain level of creativity, what we want them to be are good business people," she said, adding businesses often fall by the wayside because people don't have enough business sense.

Recently, five residents, including Banwait, were given the opportunity to make the vests people are wearing in the Ontario pavilion at the 2010 Winter Olympics. Banwait said when Langdon approached them to create the vests, she was the first to jump at the chance. "How could we refuse? It seemed like a really great opportunity for everyone," she said. Banwait and four other residents took on the challenge and had the task of designing and making 30 vests of various sizes and working within the parameters they were given, which included specifics in fabric and colour, and with one month to complete it. "The hardest part was doing the initial pattern because it needs to be so specific and everything is based on that one pattern so that was the toughest part was to make sure that pattern was perfect," she said. While it was a time-consuming and sometimes daunting task, Banwait said she will always be proud of their accomplishment and her part in it. "I can always say I designed something for the Olympics and that's really impressive for me to have done that ...some of me is in that vest and that's great," she said.

Langdon said that achievement is an example of some of many successes that have come out of TFI. They boast several alumni who have gone on to make names for themselves in the fashion world like fashion designers David Dixon and Todd Lynn, and Pina Ferlisi, who is currently the head designer for Coach Handbags.

Langdon said people don't have to have a space there to be a member of TFI. For a yearly fee, anyone can be a member and have access to all their resources and expertise. "You can be any kind of fashion enthusiast," she said. "We have people who are just students who haven't launched their careers yet, we have people who are interested in fashion who feel like they want to be behind the scenes because they love fashion so much." Visit www.fashionincubator.com for details.



Helping people in the world of fashion succeed. Toronto Fashion Incubator members from left, Jas Banwait, Mana Mojaver, Szilvia Bora, Paris Li, Natalie Good and Rebecca Lipson-Schwartz were part of the team who designed the vest people in the Ontario pavilion at the 2010 Winter Olympics are wearing. Photo Courtesy/SUSAN LANGDON