

# The Secret World of Haute Couture

High Fashion, Local Living, No Boundaries

By Jennifer Dumke



*“Couture fashion is one medium where I can hide and follow my heart.”*

Anita Kealey

When 22-year-old Kate Wismer first looked at the periwinkle and bronze dress, custom designed especially for her, she literally fell to the floor and gazed in awe. “I just remember thinking, I might as well wear a paper bag to my wedding because nothing will top this,” says the 2007 Miss South Dakota, smiling with excitement. And the woman whose talents were honed to create this one-of-a-kind haute couture fashion could only nod and smile in agreement.

For the past twenty-five years, Anita Kealey has been quietly working in her downtown studio, creating and designing couture fashions for pageant contestants, political inaugurations and entertainers. Yet, very few people knew she was establishing her local design firm – innovative contract interior design.

“I like to keep things quiet,” Kealey says of her label, Evenings by Design. Haute couture, as it’s often called, literally means high fashion sewing—a talent perfected by few yet desired by many. The custom frocks are often seen gracing red carpets, runways and stages.

Kealey began sewing and illustrating over thirty years ago and her creations have won titles, awards and have even been seen in political offices. But what makes her talent so unique is her combination of small-town ethics and boundless resources outside of her hometown.

“When I first meet with a client, I try to determine their personality,” Kealey explains of the process. This initial consultation is one of the most



important parts of creating couture clothing because it often dictates the direction of the fashion.

“Most of my clients trust me to select what will look best on them,” she adds. While working with a multitude of body shapes and sizes poses a unique challenge, Kealey says it is one of her most rewarding parts of the job.

“A person’s body shape is like wood grain—no two are ever alike,” she adds. When working with a client, establishing a flattering shape or style of the piece is one of the first things determined.

“Most people can wear a color, but it’s this stage where I begin sketching and draping muslin on the dress form that really sets the design apart.” Hundreds of cuts and needles later, a shape begins to take form and one of the most exciting parts of selecting fabrics begins.

“I prefer to work with natural fibers like silks because of their radiant colors, luxurious textures, and their ability to drape,” she adds. Layer upon layer of hand selected fabrics enter the picture and begin replacing the muslin swatches piece by piece.

“My dresses could be worn inside out because the inside should be constructed as beautiful as the outside,” Kealey adds. And like a true artist, what began as muslin swatches rough cut, draped, and assembled with needles turns into a hand-sewn masterpiece that can be finished off with intricate details such as glass crystals, embroidery and the most of what the imagination can create.



“I do aim to please,” she adds. And with Kate Wismer on her way to compete for the 2008 Miss America pageant, Kealey knows this young contestant already has an edge on the competition.

Even though the gown is one of five pieces of evening wear she designed for Wismer to wear at the Miss America Competition, “The final gown I created for her evening gown segment of competition is my favorite,” Kealey says beaming with pride.

And for Wismer, knowing her fashions have already won in the minds of many gives true confidence that this one will be a winner too.

