

A way around the no's

Fashion pioneer Lauren Chan charts her own path through industry

By Amelia Eqbal



Lauren Chan isn't afraid of the unknown.

When an injury ended her varsity career shortly after it began, Chan, BA'12 (Sociology/French), had to reevaluate her post-grad plans of becoming a semi-pro basketball player. In her newfound spare time, she pursued a hobby that quickly turned into something more.

"I had always loved fashion, and I had all this extra time on my hands, so I started writing," Chan said.

She began to consider a career in fashion journalism – a trajectory all but cemented when she learned that Western offered a course on fashion writing.

"I remember looking through the course booklet and seeing the fashion writing class and going, 'No way, we have that?'" Chan said. "I remember crossing my fingers that it wouldn't be full and that I would get in – and I did, and I absolutely loved it."

While her time at Western helped her to find a new dream, it took more than a writing class to make it come true.

Chan knew she needed to be in New York City if she was going to become a fashion editor. But, with few writing credits to her name, she was having trouble getting a visa approved. So she took an alternate route.

"I thought backwards into that logic, and I thought, 'OK, so what job skill would be unique enough to validate that outsourcing?' I figured if my job skill was what I looked like, then that might work."

Although she had never modelled before, Chan attended an open call at Ford Models in New York City the summer after graduation. She was signed to the plus-size division.

When she wasn't modelling, Chan was interning, freelance writing, going to workshops, attending panels and more to gain her footing in the industry. She quickly learned how to adapt in the face of rejection.

"It took a lot of resilience. One of the biggest lessons I learned early in my career was to find a way around the no's. Whether I was thinking about what publication made the most sense, to what type of content would make sense as my niche, it all had to be really thoughtfully planned out."

Her perseverance paid off when she was hired as a fashion features editor for Glamour magazine, a publication Chan describes as the "everywoman's magazine."

"Glamour was the best publication I possibly could have been at because it was the place that allowed us to talk about size and shopping in a real, community-driven way."

Achieving your dream at the age of 27, however, comes with its own problems.

"If I look back on the big picture, everything went to plan exceptionally quickly. I had a moment where I remember thinking, 'What am I going to do for the rest of my life if I've already done what I thought I was going to do over the next 20 years?'"

The surprising answer: Leave her dream job to start her own plus-size clothing line.

As a plus-size consumer herself, Chan knew firsthand how difficult it was to find quality, fashionable clothing in her size. While her peers at Glamour were wearing the likes of Miu Miu and Celine, Chan had to piece together work outfits from Forever 21.

"I had to sit in meetings with them and pitch myself and sell my ideas, and it was uncomfortable. It was hard to be confident, and the clothes simply didn't perform. I just grew really tired of the disadvantage I was facing just because I was the biggest body in the room."

Chan founded her brand, Henning, to change all that.

"I knew there needed to be better options; I knew that they didn't exist; I knew that it was doable because where there's a will there's a way. I really thought I was the best person to go do that. I figured out how to make clothes and run a business along the way – two small things that are really good to know if you want to run a fashion business," Chan said with a laugh.

Since debuting last fall, Henning has found its way into the closets of some famous women. Model Ashley Graham, entertainer Natasha Rothwell, and politician Stacey Abrams are among the fans of the fledgling brand. While she relishes those pinch-me moments, Chan is more fulfilled by her everyday interactions with her customers.

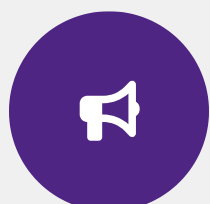
"I have an end goal of representing, serving and connecting with people who have been marginalized by the fashion industry because of their size. I don't know what will be next after this, but I feel calm knowing there is at least a framework that is clear."



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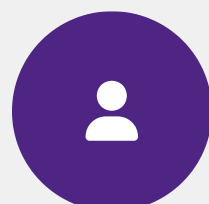
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