Monica Fidura-Ehlers

Personality Profile

Danell Lynn: Designing to Give

*A lot of labels*

Sitting in a dim corner of Hob Nobs café, not far from where she lives in downtown Phoenix, Danell Lynn blends with other locals. She sports jeans and a pair of flip-flops, her toenails meticulously painted with dark polish. She wears a simple black wrap sweater and her hair in a messy bun.

It’s hard to imagine that a woman who once designed a dress from decks of playing cards could blend in with the rest of us snatching a quick latte or sandwich from the café.

Haute couture in the United States and charity in the Third World aren’t typically synonymous, but for 31-year-old Lynn, no archetypes or abnormalities exist.

All of her endeavors, in detail, would require a short novel at best. Lynn carries about seven separate business cards so people aren’t confused or overwhelmed with her various companies and organizations.

Lynn has always had an affection for fine art and giving. She expresses her artistic passion primarily through painting, but she is also involved in sewing, knitting and designing couture gowns. One of her companies, The DL-Fine Arts, encompasses her artwork. Under dl-couture, Lynn designs her haute couture gowns. Only 13 are made each year because each dress is a unique, custom-fitted design.

Highwire is the first charitable organization Lynn founded to help less fortunate children living in other parts of the world. Through Highwire, she delivers art kits and provides lessons to children in orphanages and hospitals in Third World countries. Lynn also founded Threading Hope with her mother, which delivers hand-woven quilts to children and families in Third World countries.

Lynn laughs as she recalls a friend’s summary about her life: “One of my friends was like, ‘You’re a vegetarian who rides motorcycles who builds dresses and does humanitarian work in the Third World…what the hell?’”

“Labels…I can carry a lot of them” Lynn says.

Her father served in the Air Force, so every two-and-a-half years, Lynn’s family would move. Before she reached high school, Lynn had already attended 12 schools.

“I was that kid who was in the young author’s club, science club, recycling club, chess club and a varsity athlete,” Lynn says.

Lynn was a talented sprinter in high school, to the extent that she kept the Olympics in mind for her future. “In my sophomore year, I had full-ride scholarship offers. In my junior year, I tore my hamstring, fractured my foot and it was gone. So I had to rethink. It was the more artistic side of me that came through.”

Even though Lynn has been exposed to so many different cultures and activities, she grew up with two especially strong influences: art and giving.

“My mom made my clothes when I was a kid and my grandmother made clothes for my mom, so I came from a family that had generations of sewing,” Lynn says. “I don’t know when I made my first outfit, but my grandmom helped me make my prom dress.”

Quilting is her mother’s favorite art, but Lynn experimented with various mediums when she was younger.

“When she was very young, her favorite medium was to work with clay, and then in fifth grade she was recognized as a young author. Her skills really took off in her early years,” Kristina Green, Lynn’s mother, shares.

Lynn explored almost every school activity, but she always had a preoccupation with the world outside school—especially those who live in a world far different and less comfortable than her own.

Her family took advantage of the opportunities to help in whatever country they lived in or near at the time. When she was about 12 and living in England, Lynn volunteered with her two older brothers and parents to refurbish an orphanage in Estonia. The next summer, Lynn traveled to Kenya to help build homes.

Lynn’s inclination to give seemed to start as young as her artistic abilities. Her mother recalls when Lynn was in elementary school and emptied out her toy box for a used toy drive.

Today, Lynn fills her own wallet and empties it, giving away whatever she can at the time. In fact, her fine art and haute couture businesses were built to give back. It should be no surprise that her habits as a little girl grew up with her, defining the way she fashioned her own companies.

*Designed to give*

Lynn attended Miami International University of Art and Design in Florida. Her affection for art increased ever since her athletic dreams and goals were diminished following her high school injury. However, Lynn didn’t know she wanted to create couture, one-of-a-kind clothing until she reached college.

At first, the idea of seeing her fashion label on clothes people buy every day was appealing to her. After realizing the truth behind mass marketing and outsourcing, Lynn began to pursue another avenue of the fashion industry: haute couture.

“You want to make money at what you’re good at,” Lynn says. “But there’s just some things that morally I will not do.”

Haute couture refers to exclusive, custom-fitted clothing made from expensive, high-end fabrics and sewn with immaculate detail for specific clients.

“It felt more like artwork than just a piece of clothing because you put so much detail into each one and then it’s never made again,” Lynn says.

She became an apprentice and later assistant designer with Gerry Kelly Couture during her time at school, working until 3 o’clock in the morning and attending class the next morning as well. Although Lynn was always working and extremely passionate about fashion design, her custom clothing line did not begin until her mid-twenties.

“My heart kind of got broke right after school, working out of Miami for a couple years,” Lynn shares. “Just the mindset of the fashion world out there made me really sad and so I had to leave it for a little bit so I knew how to come back to it and build it the way I wanted it to be.”

Lynn moved from Florida to Arizona, where her father originally joined the Air Force and has since retired as well. She decided to attend Northern Arizona University for a Bachelor’s degree in psychology, another passion she wanted to pursue.

During her time in the psychology program, Lynn met the man she would soon marry and divorce, thrusting her into a different phase of life.

“We were together for four years…it just wasn’t right,” Lynn says. “It was probably the easiest divorce in history. We just amiably sat down, signed some papers and said ‘hey, this sucks.’”

After the divorce, Lynn moved to a small, very affordable artist residence community in Ajo, Arizona, which sits close to the Mexico border. When she moved to Ajo, she declared to herself, “I’m going to find out what I want to do with my life.”

Her art and design took a backseat during her marriage. Lynn had done a few shows but had no label on her artwork or fashion designs. “When I got divorced, I really threw myself into it,” Lynn says.

During her time in Ajo, Lynn launched Highwire. Although Lynn had little money to spare at that time, she put together her first art kit and used buddy passes from airline companies to reach children in South American countries.

“It was just something that came easy to me…through working with children in Third World countries and working with the limited funds I have to make a change.” Danell says. “I feel obligated, in a way, to help.”

One of her closest friends, who met Lynn during her time in Ajo, also witnessed this quality.

“She is extremely driven,” Morgana Wallace-Cooper says. “She has this internal motivation people would pay for if there was an antidote for it.”

Wallace-Cooper and Lynn were neighbors at the artist residence in Ajo. They first met while doing laundry but it didn’t take long for them to connect as friends. Even though both women are artists, it was less about collaborating than it was a meaningful friendship.

“We are both very independent and had our individual visions. We were exercise buddies, there for each other when we needed girl time,” Wallace-Cooper says. “I was so grateful to find someone so like-minded in such a small town.”

*Driven*

Back at the café, Lynn taps away on her small laptop and one of her latest projects sits on the narrow table—a hand-painted clutch made from materials she bought during her trips to other countries, directly from local merchants.

It's the prototype, in a sense, for Lynn's latest charitable business adventure. She is essentially building a business that will fund her other philanthropic investments in Highwire and Threading Hope.

None of her businesses are 501(c)(3) organizations, but they were all built with donating money in mind. For instance, dl-couture donates 10 percent of each purchase to humanitarian aid. Lynn also funds her own traveling expenses to countries where she delivers quilts through Threading Hope and art kits from Highwire.

Lynn's saint-like devotion to helping others should not be mistaken for meekness or timidity. On the contrary, Lynn has wielded a shield of perseverance and assertion in the name of her passion.

“Danell, to me, is young,” says long-time friend Charles Wilson. “She has a lot of the youthful enthusiasm and spirit. And I hope she never loses that. When you’ve been kicked around as I have, it’s nice watching her work with that. She is doing things I wouldn’t even attempt to do.”

Take for example the 2008 Global Compassion Ball at the United Nations, hosted by Airline Ambassadors International, which provides global humanitarian aid. Lynn dressed Miss America 2008 and Mrs. World 2007-2008. She was the selected designer for the event and her couture dresses were auctioned to support global programs through Airline Ambassadors International.

“All of that takes a lot of patience and a spirit that can’t be dampened,” says Wilson.

Lynn met Wilson after he purchased one of her paintings about five years ago and she delivered the piece to his home in California. Wilson, who is in his seventies, has worked with refugees his entire career. Over coffee, Lynn learned of Wilson’s refugee work and has since traveled to countries with organizations he has worked with in the past.

“She takes hopeful dreams and turns it into a driven purpose. She has a great perseverance and a high level of intelligence to orchestrate and make things happen,” says Wilson.

Lynn is her own public relations agent, so she must write about her accomplishments and draw attention to her labels. But Lynn herself is not one to rest on the mountaintop of success.

As Wilson explains, Lynn’s attitude is,“Well yea, I did that but let’s go out and do something even bigger.”

Although Lynn is always driven with the purpose of helping others, her path in life mirrors her style as a drapery designer. In this type of design, the dress is not sketched and maybe not even visualized beforehand.

Instead, a simple piece of fabric is placed on the dressmaker’s form. The fabric is pinned as the designer moves along and marks are drawn directly on the fabric to indicate cutting, stitching and more pinning. The dressmaker creates as she goes along, responding to the form of the client’s body and her whims of inspiration. Drapery results in a dramatic, graceful design that cannot be repeated unless the dressmaker chooses to turn it into a pattern.

Lynn’s own life has taken a unique form like her gowns, but unlike drapery designs, her life cannot be turned into a pattern and fitted for someone else. Her passions, choices, whims, mistakes and successes have created a woman as distinctive as her dresses.

Word Count: 1954