

Kay King named recipient of Wise Woman Award

by Nikki Rosenberg

Since 1959, Kay King has been a major influence in Houston's fashion industry. Her designs have been seen in major department stores and magazines. Yet, for almost 30 years, her greatest influence on fashion has been behind the scenes. As an educator and administrator at Houston Community College, she has inspired generations of students to shape the industry she loves.

In recognition of her role as a teacher and mentor, King was selected as the recipient of Houston Woman Magazine's 2010 Wise Woman Award. King was honored at the Fourth Annual Nominate HER Awards luncheon on May 21 at La Colombe d'Or Mansion.

Dr. Cheryl Peters, who nominated King for the award, said, "Kay is truly exemplary. She has many natural gifts: her wonderful human relations skills, her energy, and her courage and spirit. The fact that she just doesn't ever want to stop going and doing."

Even when she was forced to quit her job in order to adopt her son, Collin, King found a way to keep working. After 10 years of marriage and 11 as an employed designer, King and her husband, George, decided it was time to have a baby. When it was clear they could not conceive, the couple applied to adopt a child from DePelchin Children's Center whose rules at that time stated mothers could not work outside the home.

While still waiting for the baby, King was offered a job at Foley's as the men's fashion director. The part-time position led to a job that would change King's career. Judge Roy Hofheinz had fired his costume designer just one month before he planned to open a new theme park, AstroWorld. He called an acquaintance at Foley's who suggested King design the outfits he needed. She agreed to design and manufacture the uniforms and costumes for all park employees.

King said, "I didn't go to bed for a month. It was the best worst job I ever had. But it was very, very rewarding, and the costumes turned out just great."

That job, and the relationship it cemented with Judge Hofheinz resulted in a boost to King's career. Her designs included the Astrodome employee uniforms, Derrick Dolls Houston Oilers Cheerleader uniforms, Houston Rockets Flight Crew uniforms, and various uniforms for Parker of Houston.

During that time, King was asked to serve on an advisory committee at HCC to develop a curriculum for the new fashion design program. After writing the curriculum, King was asked to teach a class as well.

“I was scared to death, because it was never on my radar plan. But I couldn’t believe how much I loved it,” King said. “In 1991, I went back to school and got a master’s degree in liberal arts.”

Though a master’s degree was not required, she committed to her education because she was committed to those she was educating. She was Lead Instructor and in charge of hiring when the program began. From the beginning of the program, she hired only instructors with fashion industry experience to prepare the students for the more difficult aspects of the job.

When she became chair of the Lifestyle Arts and Design Careers Division, she continued the practice in each of the nine programs: Fashion Design, Fashion Merchandising, Theatrical Costume Design, Interior Design, Culinary Arts, Pastry Arts, Hotel and Restaurant Management, Travel and Tourism, and the Historical Fashion Collection. The notoriety of her students, thus the college itself, has grown during her tenure. Her encouragement to enter state, national and international competitions has resulted in her students winning numerous awards.

In 1996, King became an educator of a different sort. As president of the Federation of Houston Professional Women, she planned a trip to D.C. for members. The trip’s success led to King’s position as travel director ever since. For 15 years, she has conducted trips of up to 22 women to various cities around the world.

Peters said, “The women on Kay’s trips will go anywhere and try anything. Her courage and her spirit are boundless. And I’ve found very few women, as they get older, to exemplify that and model it for others.”

King said, “I believe in living life to the fullest. I believe in taking risks to accomplish what you want to accomplish. I guess that old adage, ‘Do what you want to do and ask forgiveness later,’ is one of my philosophies, too.”

Nikki Rosenberg is a reporter for Houston Woman Magazine.