

# South Miami news

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## Young fashion design student exhibits his work

BY LEE STEPHENS

Surrounded by fabrics, color markers, sketchbooks and art books, you can find 10-year-old Christopher Abella, Miami's youngest fashion design student, who attends South Miami K-8 Center's Expressive Arts Magnet.

Born in Miami to Cuban immigrant parents, Christopher has had a rare gift for drawing and fashion design from a young age. By 9 he already was studying privately with fashion designer Tracy Ellyn of Miami Art and Design, who worked as a designer in New York for 13 years and still designs part-time in New York while residing in Miami.

"I simply have never seen anyone so young have a passion and an understanding for the fashion figure and how to sketch it so elegantly," Ellyn said. "I've worked on Seventh Avenue for all the top designers, and I sense that he, too, could already work there. It's uncanny. Where does this come from?"

Ellyn watches her young student as he comes up with creations swirled from his pencil onto paper with nary a breath, while colors, metallics and beading come to life in his imagination. As if his unique and elegant gowns aren't enough, he then proceeds to add matching shoes of such high style that even ManoloBlahnik would believe he has a competitor.

"I ask him where he comes up with these ideas, and he simply states with the innocence of a child, 'From my head.' This is the definition of true artistic talent. With little to no exposure, and having never been to New York or Paris, he knows how to design on an intuitive level. It is as if he was a designer in his previous life, so to speak," Ellyn explained.

Laurie Russell, lead magnet teacher at South Miami K-8 Center, recognized Christopher's talent early on. He applied for her audition-based visual arts program at age 7, successfully, of course. Russell has been his fine arts teacher for the past two years, since third grade. He is just completing fourth grade at the magnet now.

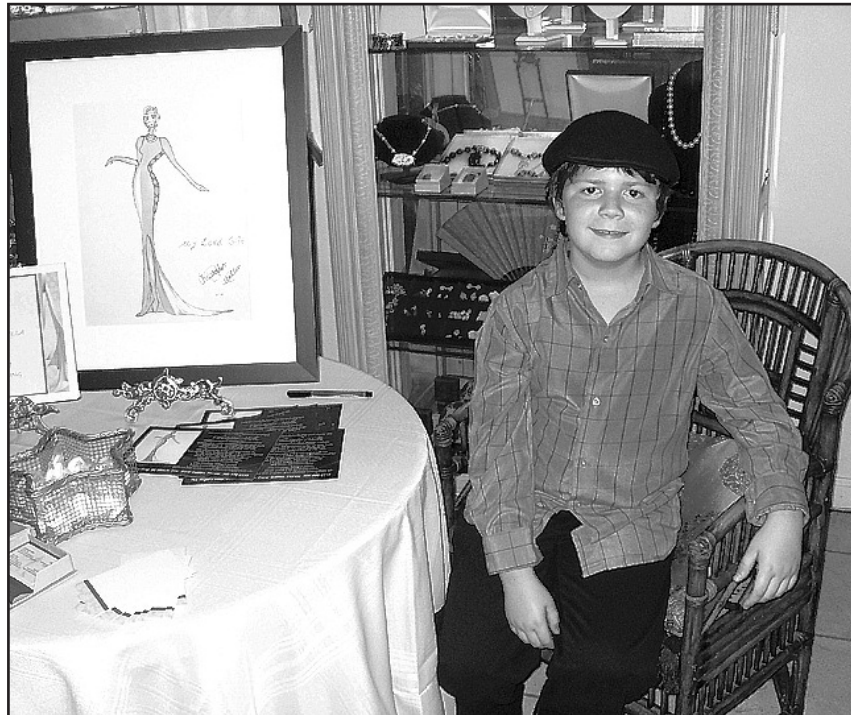
Russell has instilled in Christopher the clas-

sic training and knowledge of media that a typical college art student would receive. He has learned observational drawing, painting, mixed media, ceramics, and all of the art elements and design principles that an artist should know. It is largely due to Russell that Christopher has evolved from child artist to sophisticated visual thinker.

Simultaneously, Ellyn exposes Christopher not only to designing, but also to the history of the world's great fashion designers such as Valentino, Yves Saint Laurent, Charles James, Christian Dior, and Diane Von Furstenberg, the latter of the two with whom she worked.

His favorite designer thus far is Valentino. Ellyn shares with him a rare collector's book that she got in Europe in the 1980s containing Valentino's sketches and actual fabric swatches. Christopher can barely contain his excitement as she turns the pages for him.

At Ellyn's suggestion, Christopher went to visit the brilliant Coral Gables couture designer Ozcar G, who recognized Christopher's talent and passion immediately. Ozcar took him under his wing to show him the Ozcar G collection and explain the fabrics and construction of his one-of-a-kind gowns. Ozcar G, himself a Cuban immigrant who started in fashion at age 10, relates personally to Christopher's special passion, and has been kind enough to interrupt a wealthy woman's fitting to go sit with



Christopher Abella, 10, is pictured during his first art and fashion opening at The Angel's Ring on Miracle Mile in Coral Gables.

Christopher and talk to him about his portfolio and his future.

As equally adept on the baseball field as the drawing table, Christopher is an anomaly. At school, he is just a regular kid working on his reading and math skills, and socializing with his friends. His polite manners and humble expressions round out the picture of this rare talent.

Christopher held an opening for the exhibition of his fashion designs and art pieces during the recent Gallery Night in the Gables, at The Angel's Ring, 86 Miracle Mile. More than 200 people attended what turned out to be The Angel's Ring busiest Gallery Night since they have been in business. Christopher autographed his designer tote bags and invitations for fans, while onlookers enjoyed a wine and cheese reception. Ever sweet and humble, this creative, tiny designer in his French beret has begun his first taste of fashion world showmanship.