



DANIELLE KELLY

BY KRISTEN DIEL

I MET DANIELLE KELLY AT THE COFFEE BEAN

Café on Fairfax and Sunset on a Sunday evening to interview her before knowing what she looked like. When I got there I looked around for a woman in a "grey velour jumpsuit" and to my surprise, this gorgeous, tall dirty blonde was waiting for me at a table on the patio. "Great," I said to myself. Here I am, a fellow fashion designer wanting to meet this whiz-kid t-shirt cutter and there she is, and she looks like a model. I sat down in disbelief and asked if she was Danielle Kelly (the girl who Von Dutch is flying all over the world). She replied "yes." Kelly, 27, has embarked on her way to being at the forefront of the coasting retro-vintage phenomenon in fashion right now, and she's beautiful - this chick is really blessed! It turns out, too, that she is also very spiritual and prays about every decision she makes. In fact, she says she moved to Koreatown because God told her to move into the apartment building she now resides in. Kelly is intelligent, driven, enjoyable to speak with and, of course, she is really nice too. She still has that pure dedication to the craft that makes a person who has been in the mix for awhile feel like their whole MO is convoluted, namely, me. But I am grateful for meeting her. Sometimes we have to see the entire picture before we can figure out where we want to go next.

Kelly did not even come to Los Angeles from Indiana three years ago with the intent of turning her designs into a career. She started out as a makeup artist in her hometown who worked at fashion shows as well as in a salon. Just like the rest of us girls, when she walks into clothing stores she feels like nothing fits her style. With this in mind, she decided to take a few 0



old t-shirts and cut them up so they looked "original". At a nightclub where she was working as a cashier four months ago, a sales rep from Von Dutch approached her and asked if someone else had made her top. When she told him that she cut it by hand, he set up an appointment for her with the Head Designer of Von Dutch, who sat her down, gave her a t-shirt, some scissors and after looking at his watch, walked out of the room and told her to find him when she was done. "It was my first time cutting it on another person other than myself. I would sit in front of the mirror, take it off and then try it back on. That was a lot of pressure for me but I was quick about it," explained Kelly. After coming back into the room, he reviewed her work and told her that she was "in", would start working from 2:7pm everyday, and not to be late.

Ultimately she replaced another designer who would slit tops with a razor blade. He left the company to start his own line, but his clientele were coming in and asking her to do his work. "A lot of girls were coming in asking for his stuff and I said 'no, if you want that then you have to go next door because I won't do what he did because its not in my beliefs.' I created my own clientele. I started taking pictures of everything that I made and I made a portfolio. So when the girls come in, I show them the things that have already sold and I ask them to tell me what part of their body they are comfortable showing," she said. Her sales have since doubled every month.

Kelly presently custom designs for her personal clients 50% of the time, and the rest of her merchandise are one-of-a-kinds that sell in Von Dutch. Kelly does not want to go mainstream to produce duplicates of her tops. "I think that the whole idea of being an individual does not include having Von Dutch plastered across your chest. I never want it to get to the point where everyone is walking around with a Danielle Kelly shirt on." But she might have to start planning otherwise. Not only is she working for Von Dutch, but now she is also going to also be designing for Fetish.

Hip-hop artist Eve was given one of her bathing suits as a gift because she was not getting any kickback for doing publicity for Von Dutch. Thereafter, Kelly received phone calls from Fetish executives. They asked her to cut a couple of pieces for them. She worked around the clock to make two swimsuits. They chose one of them to be in a multi-million dollar advertising campaign that will include huge billboards across Los Angeles for Fetish.

She has not even signed any contracts. The companies provide her with the materials, take the price of the garments, and she charges \$100 an hour for labor. But with her being the only person producing her merchandise, her time is strained and Kelly does want to become more exclusive. "They want it to be fabulous but they want it in a second. It's a handmade piece and I'm trying to design it from scratch. [They] want something original and its nothing like anybody else's and [they] expect me to spit on it and be done and it is not like that." Ultimately she would like to custom design for her personal clients all of the time because she feels that higher-end clients understand the reasoning. "I have got people coming to me for this advertising that I cannot even handle. Unless I went mass production I could not do anymore than I am doing right now," she said.

Kelly is not concerned with people knocking her off because her designs are constantly changing. After she tries one concept, she has no desire to continue producing it. Also, with it being a handmade piece that she cuts manually with custom fitting and individual focus, she can develop both a product and a relationship with her client. "They don't have the same respect if they don't see me making the top. It's fascinating to them. And what they buy has to be completely different from what they just bought or why are they going to buy it? It is the difference between 'Oh, you got that at Urban Outfitters' to 'Oh my gosh I've never seen anything like that!'" she said.

Kelly is adamant about treating her craft as artwork rather than merchandise. And, now she is going to be traveling to Europe for trade shows because Von Dutch wants to get a buzz going over there. She concludes, "My main thing is just enjoying life. I don't want to wait for what might never come. Maybe I'll just go to Europe making just enough to survive for that day and travel around with a little bag and my scissors!" I was so impressed with her attitude towards design and the market she is selling to in light of the opportunities that are being presented to her. She says that ultimately, she would like to have a boutique in Miami where women can come in, get their hair done and get a top cut up for them simultaneously. I wonder if you would have to make an appointment... ■