

Norma Kamali



The innovative spirit and entrepreneurial attitude is what makes fashion not only creative, but a business. With countless accolades and accomplishments we at Nolcha Magazine find Norma Kamali an inspiration to both fashion students as well as up-and-coming designers around the world. Being the first on many levels of the fashion industry is always an interesting journey. Editor-in-Chief Lynn Furge sat down with Ms. Kamali to time-line her career and link them to their fashion influences to prove that Kamali is the reigning Queen of the Design Entrepreneurs.

1964 – Graduated from FIT with a degree in Fashion Illustration

Lynn Furge: Did you always know you wanted to have your own line, or originally did you feel you wanted to sketch for other designers, magazines?

Norma Kamali: No, I never wanted to be in Fashion. I wanted to paint but I was looking for a commercial venue for my drawing and painting skills. In FAT at FIT at the time everyone was dressed very Jackie O with matching bags, shoes, etc., even gloves. I was never that well put together, so I decided to leave fashion and try travel. I ended up at an airline job in the office and went to London every weekend for 29 dollars round trip for four years straight. I was in the right place for my destiny. I knew this type of fashion expression was much more like me.

1968 – First shop on 229 E 53rd Street.

LF: How did you get buzz around the opening of your store as a young designer?

NK: While at the airlines, I brought back styles from BIBA and Bus Stop and carried them through and sold them in my basement shop. Rent was 285 dollars per month! Soon enough I started designing and making clothes. And I was literally discovered in that basement. The shop was in a row of coloured brownstones with other new designers like Betsy Johnson and her store Betsy Bunky and Nini Three Partners... so I was in a cluster of stores that were of interest to people to see. Kind of like the East Village or the Lower East Side is to people today.

1975 – First Sleeping Bag Coat

LF: For an item that has been around for over 3 decades, how to you promote the timelessness of the piece, while keeping with today's society's desires for newness?

NK: Timeless style, I have learned and really continue to learn really is fashion. When a trend evolves to timeless style, you have truly achieved something as a designer.

1977 – Swimwear worn by Christie Brinkley shot by Francesco Scavullo for Sports Illustrated.

LF: How did you have to change the direction of your business plan or collection focus due to the industry's and commercial excitement over your swimwear?

NK: Carefully expand with caution to still be strong in swimwear. Believe in your convictions and stay with them.

1980 – Fashion at a Price Collection

LF: With everything being more is more in the over-indulgent 80's how did you find a need for fashion at a more reasonable price? What effects did it have on your business and the industry?

NK: It turned me from a cult designer to being much better known.

1984 – Fall Fantasy video directed and produced by Norma Kamali

LF: This video pushed forward an important trend in fashion merchandising... please explain.

NK: It was my answer to runway... See the clothes on real women with humor. Sex and the City is the evolution of that theme and it is a huge success. And way more accessible to women than fashion shows which can be elitist. But in fashion it seems, "elite" is not such a dirty word so the film is the best of both worlds.

1986 – Design for Twyla Tharp

LF: How do you approach designing for dance, film or auxiliary projects that aren't specifically a new season's Norma Kamali collection?

NK: I studied anatomy, Michelangelo was my idol and Rudolph Nureyev was too so designing for dance is easy...

1986 Cont. – Win the Architecture Award for your Flagship store on 511 W. 56th Street

LF: How do you branch out with designing when dealing with architecture and not fabric? What elements did you want your space to embody? What kind of non-fashion projects inspire you?

NK: I love them all. Design is design and one label is crippling to me. As I venture out to new projects I become ever more inspired to design clothes and concepts for dressing.

1987 – Licensing deal between Norma Kamali and Bloomingdales for a specific line exclusive to that department store

LF: How do you feel you paved the way for other designers to link up with retail corporations and create exclusivity? Were you inspired to create an exclusive line, or did Bloomingdales approach you?

NK: It was unique and the first of its kind. I loved it... lots of opportunity to think of the image of the store. I totally believe in this especially if a store feels a designer has the pulse of their customer.

1988 – Public Education Association Award for Outstanding Graduate

LF: Why do you find working with the youth of our culture is so important? What one lesson can you teach them through your own experience?

NK: I am a public school graduate and the opportunities for inner city schools and the students is limited. I was fortunate to have outside businesses come to the school I was in and present me with grants and scholarships that allowed me the opportunity to go on with my education. Now is my chance to do the same for others. I truly get back more in the process of doing this than I give...

1993 - OMO launched because of the active lifestyles of the 1990's

LF: What about active wear inspires you? What design elements need to be taken into account when designing for that specific market of busy women?

NK: OMO was established in 1976 when I left my partner and ex-husband to open my own business on my own. The active line was based on the new awareness of fitness health and beauty which I am still

(NK CONT.) committed to in my business. I love doing technical design for the body, its movement and the feel of support when working out or the function of the construction and the cloth in active sportswear. It is the most modern of all design for women

1994 – Beauty line Launched

LF: With beauty, eyewear, home, etc. please explain to me the idea behind the beginnings of a “lifestyle brand” and not just a fashion label? Was that your initial intention?

NK: I do what I believe in and beauty was in a transition and still is... The belief that to look beautiful the more make up you wore to look airbrushed was the look then. I believe that fresh, healthy skin of any age is more beautiful and the less you cover it and the more you do to improve its health, the more beautiful you look and the more youthful.

1995 – Poly Jersey Collection

LF: Many of the new designers pride themselves on separates that are multi-functional for that busy lifestyle and I feel you are the queen of that entire movement in fashion. Can you please explain why you chose the specific textiles you did when initially launching the Poly Jersey Collection?

NK: Any designs that function and are easy to care for, are portable and packable is modern and what I do best because that is how I live. 1996 – World Wide Virtual Reality of the Kamali Collection
omo-norma-kamali.com

LF: Who attended, how did you get people to participate when the idea of virtual collections was so new?

NK: The internet was new for streaming and selling and we actually set up our website and the launch of our collection on line.

1998 – Shop Like a Celebrity Service

LF: In a current world, where everyone wants special treatment, and nothing comes fast or easy enough you really pioneered the convenience of on-line shopping. I feel simple things like Zappos.com (for shoes) would not even exist if it weren't for your original idea, please explain the evolution of Shop Like a Celebrity and if that helped you gain a larger clientele, how it changed you internet business etc.?

NK: It is what everyone should do. Allow clients 48 hours to try before they buy and they only pay for what they keep... so what better way is there to buy a swimsuit. Then it is a final sale!

1999 – Living Rubber Collection

LF: Please describe the technology involved to create this product?

NK: Body heat changes the color of the fabric like the mood ring type principle.

2000 – www.normakamalICollection.com

LF: How do you feel the internet has changed fashion for both the customer and the designer?

NK: It made fashion accessible to the masses...therefore the mass stores are now acceptable places to shop for everyone!! It also made for smarter shoppers who can find what they want at a price they feel

(NK CONT.) comfortable with.

2002 – Entrepreneur Award by the Fashion Group

LF: What one piece of advice would you give a person starting out in the fashion industry?

NK: You have to accept hard work. No money and no recognition for a while, maybe a long while. It took me 14 years before I earned a real living. The recognition is nice but there is always tomorrow and another collection and challenge. You must love it above all and decide what your commitment will be early on.

2003 – Launch of wellness.com, Bar XV space

LF: As the lives and practices of your clients evolve, Norma Kamali evolves with that change. Please explain your intuitive process and where you see lifestyle boutiques going in the future?

NK: Basically I continue to do what is true to my interest. This is and was fitness health and beauty in the early 80's and 90's so wellness is very much in my sensibility.

2005 – Everlast Sweats Deal

LF: The idea of sportswear is as American as apple pie and baseball. How do you keep the designs current and fun while still creating functional basics that the public needs?

NK: This is timeless style... what I did in the 80's at a time when no one wore sweats to travel or out of the gym. And now casual is the lifestyle of all Americans. It goes to say that the sweats are timeless and good timeless style is the challenge to design. It is hard not to over trend the style.

2006 – Spiegel Deal launching the jersey pieces in an exclusive collection

LF: What can you teach designers about creating detailed simplicity (by this I mean a succinct collection in basic colors and fabrics that need to fit many different types of women and be flattering to many ages)?

NK: Here is another look at timeless styles I have done through the years made at a price with no compromise to fabric construction or design for an online and catalogue business. The ability to appeal to many women was the success of this collection, and still is.

2008 and beyond –

LF: What role do you feel technology plays with each of your collections? How do you mix vintage sensibilities with futuristic textiles and create a harmonious balance?

NK: My next project is to design for Wal-Mart, the largest store in the world. I can reach and affect more lives through this venue than any other. I can help women with self esteem issues and I have the opportunity to design into many categories. I continue the high end lines for my store and Barneys and Bergdorf type stores but this is the thrill of my career. Where my work through Wal-Mart will affect more lives than my vote as an American citizen!