Famed model works the runway with middle school designs

By Julie Shapiro

Rail-thin models stomped down the runway at Milk Gallery, staring down the flashbulbs, flaunting clothing hot off the sewing machine.

One wore a tight black turtleneck paired with a patchwork miniskirt. Another sported a flowing gold gown, and a third wore a raincoat made entirely of silver Capri Sun pouches.

The event had all the makings of a high-end fashion show, but the designers were not household names — unless your household happens to include a student from the Manhattan Academy of Technology.

M.A.T. middle school students designed and sewed the 37 looks featured in last Friday night’s fashion show, which along with a silent auction raised $10,000 for the school’s art and fashion design programs.

The 500-person, standing-room-only crowd was any fashion designer’s dream — but for seventh and eighth graders, the recognition was beyond belief.

“It was, like, unreal, amazing,” said a flushed Clea Howard, 14, just after the show. She pressed her hands to her cheeks. “I don’t even have words for it,” she said. “It’s so cool. People are seeing all this work I’ve done.”

Howard and 20 other students spent the last several years under the tutelage of Nicole Schorr, the M.A.T. art teacher who also hosts an after-school fashion design class. Schorr was so impressed with the students’ designs and execution — she jokes that she would buy a few of the pieces if she could afford them — that she thought a wider audience should get a look.

“They sew and design better than some college students,” Schorr said. “They are so capable and so serious. People don’t give them credit. Give them a challenge and they rise to it.”

Amy Ye, 13, beamed as she described the crowd’s reaction to one of her pieces. She made a red-and-black patterned robe and was uncertain about whether it was good enough for the show. But when a model burst onto the runway wearing the silky robe over a black bathing suit and heels, the crowd roared.

“My self-esteem was pretty low about it, but everyone was cheering,” Ye said, shrugging. Her smile said the rest.

The students also got a boost from two fashion celebrities who volunteered for the event: Stacy London, co-host of TLC’s “What Not to Wear,” and Whitney Thompson, winner of the latest season of “America’s Next Top Model.” London emceed the show and Thompson modeled three outfits on the runway. They both met with the designers before the show, leaving a trail of squeals and admiring smiles in their wake.

“It’s nice to see the spark of ideas so much younger,” London said, recalling that she didn’t know she could work in fashion until she was older. Fashion designing teaches kids to look at the world through a different lens than they use in their traditional classes, London said. She added that she is impressed with the results: “It’s inspiring to see something so original.”

Several weeks before the cameras and celebrities arrived, Clea Howard sat in M.A.T.’s art room after school, twisting a strip of pink fabric into the shape of a rose. She bent over a list of instructions, coaxing the fabric with stitches.

The rose would be an ornament for a pink sleeveless dress with darts running up the front, one of three dresses Howard crafted for the fashion show. She also made a white halter dress with blue polka dots, which she said she would happily wear, and a black long-sleeved wrap dress with a pattern of green and tan circles.

“I’m really proud of the dresses,” Howard said as she pulled them off a rack in one corner of the art room. “I worked really hard.”

In her three years in the fashion design class, Howard learned to thread and operate a sewing machine, copy patterns, select fabrics and add her own twist to other people’s designs.

“It’s a lot of work and sometimes you make the same mistake multiple times,” Howard said. “You have to do it again to get it right.”

Schorr, the fashion and art teacher, said the class teaches students to push through their frustration. They learn to focus intensely on something that takes a long time to complete, a skill they can bring back to their other classes, she said. The calculations and measuring involved in patterns also build math skills, Schorr and several parents said.

The fashion show was an easy sell to London, who agreed to host the event as soon as she heard about it. She likes that the students in M.A.T.’s fashion program are not competitive, even though they range in ability.

“I love that they’re so supportive of each other,” London said. “Women need to support women in better ways and not rip each other to shreds.”

As the students put finishing touches on their garments several weeks before the show, Hannah Maratea, 12, was sewing a zipper onto a silky cream-colored miniskirt.

“I sort of know what to do,” she said, maneuvering the needle with care. The skirt belonged to her friend, Marissa Bonnelly, but Maratea was helping out because she had sewn a zipper onto one of her own outfits several weeks earlier.

Maratea made a little black dress for the show, which she described as “very posh looking.” Learning about fashion design and the work that goes into manufacturing clothing makes Maratea appreciate what she wears — even though her clothes are mostly made by machines, not people.

On that note, Maratea pushed the needle through the zipper one last time.

“I hope I did it right,” she said, flipping the fabric to check.

She hopped up, grinning. “I got it right the first time, hand sewed — I’m so proud of myself!” she said. Bonnelly, hearing her, rushed over for a high-five.

As Bonnelly, 13, looked at her newly zippered skirt, she recalled getting interested in fashion two years ago, when she was in fifth grade.

“I never thought I’d have a chance to get stuff in a show,” she said.

At another table, Parade Stone, 13, was sewing a waistband onto a green miniskirt. She got interested in fashion after watching TV shows about designing. She said sewing was harder than she expected.

“It’s one of those things you try, where even if you’re not necessarily good at it, it’s fun to try,” Stone said. “It’s difficult, but I like the idea of accomplishing something really difficult.”

The dress Stone made for the show, an Asian-inspired number with a pattern reminiscent of fireworks, took nearly a year to craft, and she couldn’t wait to see it on the runway. When Stone first heard about the fashion show, she figured it would be an event for students, maybe in the gym.

“But when I heard it was going to be real models, a real runway, it got so exciting,” Stone said. “Whoa, we’re like real designers.”