



TRUTH, CULTURE, AND THE HOUSTONIAN WAY

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HIP: NO DESIGNER LEFT BEHIND





Denise Jackson is on her way to entrepreneurship without having to pay a dime in operating expenses. The petite forty-something mother is one of few designers showcasing a collection at the Houston Incubator Project (HIP), a small pop-up shop that two weeks ago sat directly across from the pizza spot in the food court at West Oaks mall near the Toby Keith's Bar & Grill entrance. HIP lived in a mall off of the wrong side of highway 6 where Hobby Lobby, Applebee's and Bed Bath and Beyond are replicated down the entire stretch of the highway to Westheimer Road, where auto repair shops and tax offices are nestled in strip centers, and an assortment of home repair billboards clutter the skyline. The parking lot, on a Saturday, was half vacant with a few tricked out slabs and young mothers slowly shuffling to the entrance. As of two weeks ago the store is now closed.

On this particular Saturday the HIP founder, Toni Whitaker, was a bit frazzled

managing the boutique. Her thoughts vacillated between her mother's battle with dementia and the latest collections. Back in 2009 she closed her own boutique of thirty years in Rice Village because of her commitment to taking care of her mother Mattie, an accomplished dressmaker who could whip up a dress for any occasion.

So when presented with the opportunity to launch a pop-up shop back in December 2013, she hopped on it. The sandy haired, salt n' pepper beauty slides into a chair to chat over cup of wine about politics and the who's who of Houston's fashion scene. She's a typical fashion maven- in control and fierce, with a low tolerance for misrepresentation: "Some folks think that I'm too much, too opinionated."

For over twenty years Toni Whitaker, catered to affluent wives, darlings and doctors, but in the past decade so many things have changed. In 1984, studio rent in West Village for a small boutique was \$100 per month, when she left four years ago its was at \$4500 per month. When her mother became sick Toni had no choice but to close. Now she's back on the scene, recently teaching a module at Rice University on Fashion in Film and giving life to a forgotten mall. Houston's booming economy has attracted interest from all over the nation and the rent is squeezing a lot of folks out of business. As she casually fills the patrons cups at the small pop-up store, she bemoans, "For rent alone, a store owner would need at minimum \$20,000-\$30,000 in capital before launching a boutique in the city, and if you don't have a backer, you can forget it." Therein lies the reality of HIP's relevance to the fashion community.



Toni's expertise is deep in aesthetics and design principles and like a sensei of fashion design, she's about the development of intelligent designers. "Have you ever thought about what it takes to design a pattern?" she asks rhetorically, then runs down the list with three fingers, "heat transfer is physics, polyester versus cotton – that's chemistry, cutting patterns and sizing a garment to a particular body, well, that's math. HELLO!"

As her students observed, she worked the store, pulling in mallrats, casual

passerbyers, and food court employees not only for sales but to experience what her students are creating.

HIP is a teaching shop in that students of fashion, if they're honest about themselves and the craft, will learn, grow and get their collections sold to buyers. The goal for this project was to expose emerging designers and develop strong collections in the spirit of entrepreneurship.

Sharsten Plenge, the founder and director of We Open Art Houses (WOAH), was responsible for the partnership between HIP and West Oaks Mall. As long as the business is a non-profit or a creative service that's completely new and community oriented, WOAH is the bridge between working from home to running out of a brick and mortar for low to no cost.

The pop-up shop trend is slow to the U.S. in comparison to the United Kingdom, Ireland and Berlin, so having one in Houston seems so relevant right now. Sharsten thinks highly of HIP and its leader, "Toni's a unique person, she's an entrepreneur, she knows how to make things work, she's taking fashion and not using it as an exclusive thing — it's more accessible."

HIP was slated to be open for just a month, but WOAH negotiated a contract that extended through March 31. Pop-up shops are usually open for a few weeks to a month, but HIP ran its course for four months. At this point, HIP will be hosting trunks shows and mentoring artists and professionals for the rest of the year.

As for Denise, a Howard grad with aspirations of being the first black haute couture designer, and other designers like 62-year-old Linda Soders who retired from a job that she hated to now focusing her young mind on designing accessories, and Mia Arenas, a pattern maker with a custom design background all saw the HIP opportunity as a blessing.

There's a sourness in Houston's fashion community, and the HIP participants seem to agree that the (fashion) organizations lack support for emerging designers, and the tight control of the city's southern elite over who's *in* has left many aspiring designers and spectators marginalized. "I would just like to see a real fashion scene," Denise said.

Toni's last session on Fashion in Film will be held at Rice University on April 9.

Photography by Cameron Butler