CAL’s culture of “Yes” yields Academy Awards-worthy dress

A dream come true for Jillian Granz
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One afternoon in late 2009, a call came into the Dean’s Office of MSU’s College of Arts and Letters. The male caller had a distinctive Australian accent, and asked to speak with the Dean or the person who could make a decision on whether MSU’s Apparel and Textile Design program might participate in an international sustainable dress design competition. The note on the message slip said that the caller, Craig Laforest, represented Suzy Cameron, wife of film director James Cameron.

With curiosity suitably piqued, Dean’s Office staff returned Mr. Laforest’s call and asked how they could help. He immediately began laying out Mrs. Cameron’s plans to hold an international competition to create an eco-friendly, sustainable-design dress for Suzy Amis Cameron to wear to “a major red carpet event” in March 2010 – adding that he could not yet divulge the event’s name. Funds raised through the competition would benefit Muse Elementary School/MUSE Global, a non-profit entity comprising three elementary schools founded by Mrs. Cameron and her sister.

Having read very positive things about CAL’s Apparel and Textile Design program online, Laforest said that MSU was the first college he’d called outside of California, and asked, “Would MSU be interested?” The answer was immediate. After being briefed on the call that same afternoon, College of Arts and Letters Dean Karin A. Wurst replied with a decided, “Yes.” And in the days that followed, leading up to MSU’s firm commitment in November to participate in Mrs. Cameron’s First Annual Red Carpet Green Dress competition, the idea was met with a flurry of faculty and staff who all said “Yes,” when asked to become involved.

MSU Department of Art and Art History Chair Tom Berding said “Yes,” when asked if the Apparel and Textile Design program could participate. Berding then approached newly hired ATD program Associate Professor Theresa Winge with the idea of working it into an existing course. Winge not only said “Yes,” she went about re-imagining the entire course to include sustainable design and dress making as major components, as the contest required designers to conceptualize a dress or gown made from only sustainable material, such as natural, organic or recycled fabric.

RE-IMAGINED COURSE
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The first week in December, the first annual Red Carpet Green Dress competition was announced at a news conference with Suzy Amis Cameron in Hollywood, CA. The contest was opened to all designers and would-be designers worldwide with a submission deadline of January 22, 2010, and the winning dress design decision to be made by Mrs. Cameron by the first week in February in a blind judging. Mrs. Cameron would be judging solely on the dress design sketches and the accompanying write-ups regarding the design’s sustainability. No names or locations of the submitted sketches’ designers would be revealed until a winning design was chosen.

Working closely with UR Media Communications Manager Kristen Parker and other staff members in MSU’s University Relations Department – which also gave a decided “Yes,” when asked to assist on public relations and publicity around the competition – a news release and an MSU archives photo of ATD senior Jillian Granz were prepared for release. The photo of Granz was one of only three photos from the program in the MSU archives at the time.

December 27, the day before that first news release hit the wires regarding MSU’s College of Arts and Letters’ Apparel and Textile Design program’s participation in the contest, a Google search returned eight pages with the name “Jillian Granz” and MSU, primarily Jillian’s Facebook and other social media pages or references. A week later, that number had climbed to 139,

(Left) ATD students work on their Red Carpet Green Dress designs (Right) Apparel and Textile Design students go over their designs with Professor Winge.
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as the release was picked up by newspapers and online web sites worldwide and across the U.S. from California to Connecticut and Oregon to Florida.

CLASS GOES TO WORK
Then came the students enrolled in Winge’s class. With design submissions due on January 22, 2010, less than a month after the news release was distributed, Professor Winge’s class went fast to work once the holidays were over and classes began. When asked how many wished to participate in the competition and submit a design, all 17 of the young women designers agreed to do so, including MSU senior Jillian Granz. And while the competition only required submission of a design sketch for the dress (because the actual gown would be sewn by a well-known Hollywood designer of Mrs. Cameron’s choosing) all 17 women made plans to actually create and sew their submitted designs. This final decision – which was integrated into the class curriculum – would prove fortuitous for all.

The design students’ initial design concepts were discussed and critiqued in class, and, by mid-January, most everyone had decided their basic look and materials. As for the sustainability of the designs, a mathematical formula was worked out that would allow each designer to calculate the approximate sustainability percentage of her dress. All of the completed dresses ended up with an 86- to 95-percent sustainability quotient.

As the design competition deadline loomed, each designer’s sketches were fine-tuned and prepared for submission. Final critiques by fellow students resulted in a few last-minute changes, but overall, the final designs submitted were very close to the early January concepts. In the end, 16 of the 17 design students submitted design sketches, as one dropped out due to conflicting pressures of her academic schedule. Confident in their designs, the class of designers looked forward to hearing who had won the competition from the expected thousands of designs that would be submitted worldwide.

They didn’t have long to wait. In a remarkable turn of events, the dress design of Jillian Granz, whose photograph had accompanied MSU’s news release largely because it was one of only three in the archive files, was chosen as the winning design. On the afternoon of February 9, Mrs. Cameron phoned the MSU campus to speak with Granz and let her know that she had won. Jillian, who had been asked to come to the University Relations offices in Olds Hall on a ruse of giving assistance in identifying fellow designers in class photographs, was ecstatic.

“This is so exciting! I wasn’t expecting this at all,” Granz said with a smile after receiving the congratulatory call from Amis Cameron. When asked about the winning design, the Canton, MI, native answered that, due to contest rules, she had been told that she could only say that she “had recommended the dress be made from peace silk, which allows silk worms to complete their life cycle, rather than be boiled, as is the case with traditional silk. I also recommended a no-waste pattern, in which every part of the pattern is utilized and put into the final garment rather than being discarded. Mrs. Cameron explained that they want the actual gown design to be a secret until it is unveiled on the red carpet in March.”

In the three weeks that followed, plans were made and implemented to fly Jillian out to Los Angeles to meet with Mrs. Cameron, attend fittings at the studio of famous Hollywood...
Jillian Granz and Suzy and James Cameron presented Granz’s winning entry at the Global Green pre-Oscars charity event in Hollywood.
clothing designer Deb Scott, tour Mrs. Cameron’s Muse Elementary in Topanga Canyon and attend various other events. As Academy Award nominations had been released February 2 – and Mrs. Cameron’s husband James Cameron and his blockbuster film “Avatar” had been nominated for nine Oscars including Best Picture – it was confirmed that Amis Cameron would wear Granz’s winning dress to the red carpet event on Sunday, March 7, 2010. Jillian was on hand in L.A. from Sunday, February 28 through Thursday, March 4, staying at the luxurious Fairmont Miramar Hotel and Bungalows, a Red Carpet Green Dress corporate sponsor.

The beneficiaries of the Red Carpet Green Dress competition fit especially well with the College of Arts and Letters’ three thematic areas: Educating for Global Awareness, Educating for Creativity, and Educating for Inclusive Democracy.

Proceeds from the Red Carpet Green Dress contest benefited MUSE Elementary which Suzy Amis Cameron founded with her sister, Rebecca Amis, and for which Mrs. Cameron serves as creative visionary. MUSE Elementary is dedicated to empowering children from across the socio-economic spectrum to realize the full potential of their lives through academic excellence, personal responsibility, compassionate relations, global consciousness and environmental awareness. Located on a magical 22-acre campus in Topanga Canyon, California, the progressive, independent, non-profit school presently offers Early Childhood Education through 5th grade. The school’s scholarship fund provides financial aid to about 50 percent of its students.

Through MUSE Global, the institution has partnerships and shares projects with the Mana Tamariki school in New Zealand and the Good Morning School on the Thai-Burma border. The latter school educates children of migrant workers who have escaped genocide in Burma (Myanmar).

“We actually support that school 100 percent, and all of the children who go to it,” Amis Cameron said. “We share curriculum with those schools. We connect these children through e-mail and video, and they’re able to do projects together and grow together.”

BUSY AGENDA

Following the tour and lunch at MUSE Elementary, Jillian attended two days of dress fittings at Deb Scott’s studio, and participated in a discussion on eco-friendly design at James Cameron’s offices in Santa Monica. She then toured his on-site museum seeing such displays as the navigation wheel from Cameron’s epic movie “Titanic.” The next night, Jillian was guest of honor with the Camerons at Global Green USA’s 7th Annual Pre-Oscar Party at the Avalon in Hollywood. The night featured musical performances by CAMP FREDDY and friends, Benji & Joel Madden of Good Charlotte, and Mia Mestro. Celebrities in attendance included Leonardo DiCaprio, Jessica Alba, Serena Williams, Nicole Scherzinger, Juliette Lewis, Radha Mitchell, Josie Maran, and Sharon Lawrence.

ON-STAGE UNVEILING

The high point of the charity event was the official on-stage unveiling by Mrs. Cameron of Granz’s design draped on a mannequin, as Suzy, her husband and Jillian took questions from the media. The resulting gown in a stunning blue – an appropriate color given James Cameron’s blue-skinned “Avatar” aliens – had been rumored to be red, so the fashionistas in attendance were for once taken by surprise.

“Choosing from sketches and designs worldwide, it was a tough decision,” Amis-Cameron said. “Jillian’s design was stunning and had that something special. It’s a beautiful combination of sustainability and style. I’m excited to promote the talent of this young designer.”

Four days later, as Jillian watched back in Michigan with family and friends, Suzy Cameron paraded the Academy Awards red carpet with her husband wearing a matching blue swatch of silk in his suit jacket’s breast pocket. All in the Canton crowd oohed and aahed appropriately, as a few screams of “There it is! There’s your dress!” were also heard. And throughout the evening’s awards show, every time the Camerons were on screen – which was pretty often, given James Cameron’s multiple nominations – everyone craned for a better look at what had become known as “the dress.”
“It was a magical experience and an exciting night, filled with incredible memories and some newly-made friends,” says Jillian. “I only wish all of our designers and Professor Winge could have been there with me. They are all so very talented, and worthy of exposure. And I know they would have found Suzy and James Cameron to be just as warm, welcoming and gracious as I did.”