

# ALUMNA SHOWCASE

## FASHION DESIGN

# HEIDI ELNORA

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photographs by **LUANNE DEMEO**  
and **ACQUILLE DUNKLEY**

**You might know Heidi Elnora as the talented bridal designer and host of TLC’s “Bride by Design” but Elnora was once just a country girl from Alabama with big dreams. Elnora loved fashion ever since she was a little girl and always knew she wanted to be a designer. But she was more than just a dreamer. Elnora says she was going to work tirelessly to make her dreams come true. “I knew that that’s what I wanted and I’m a very determined person,” she says.**

The first step to realizing her dreams was going to SCAD. She received a presidential scholarship which allowed her to be able to afford a college education. She enrolled in the SCAD fashion design program and she said, “When I attended SCAD, it was such a blessing.” Her determination and passion made her stand out from the other students. Elnora said that she was not there to have



fun; she was there to learn as much as she could about the fashion industry as possible from her professors. “I asked my teachers so many questions I probably drove them insane.” Elnora took advantage of all of the resources available to her at SCAD and expressed how grateful she was to have had the opportunity to go to a creative school. “Going to SCAD was really amazing for me because for the first time I felt like I fit in. I was surrounded by other artists and other people who thought outside the box, were creative, and had this creative energy about them.” She fed off the creative energy of SCAD students and professors while she was here and finally graduated in 2002.

After SCAD, she began working as a designer at Carter’s children wear in Atlanta. Although she had never planned to be a children’s wear designer she enjoyed her job and was determined to live in the city and climb up the corporate ladder. While she worked at Carter’s, she dreamed of one day pursuing her original goal of designing women’s ready-to-wear. Then, about four years after working at Carter’s, Elnora tried out for “Project Runway” in 2005. She went to Miami to audition for the show and to her amazement, she made it. “It was really cool because of all the people that auditioned at the Miami auditions, there was one that made it, which was me.” When talking about her dreams beginning to solidify themselves, Elnora said, “It was awesome to see my dreams really evolving. SCAD was the start of my dreams evolving and then being on ‘Project Runway’ just kind of helped to clarify this was the right path for me.” She says she was now more confident than ever and knew that her goals were within reach.

Unfortunately, soon after “Project Runway,” Elnora was in a terrible car accident that changed the course of her entire life. In October 2005, she was hit by a drunk driver. Elnora went to Alabama where her mother, who is a nurse, took care of her and helped her recover. While recovering in Alabama, she met and fell in love with the man who is now her husband. For this reason, she moved back to Alabama permanently. While in Alabama, she wondered “What can I do here? We’re not known as the fashion capital by any means.” Although she always

wanted to do women’s ready-to-wear, she realized she had to do something more meaningful to stand out in a place that wasn’t known for its fashion. She veered off her expected course to try something she had never done before. “Bridal was not really where I planned to go. I planned to do women’s ready-to-wear. It was my goal and my plan, but that wasn’t God’s plan necessarily.” Elnora wanted to design something that a woman would cherish forever and not something that relied on the latest trends, so in 2006 she started her own bridal company, Heidi Elnora. Although Elnora was confident and determined, she said “I started my company from scratch never having designed one wedding dress in my entire life. I thought I could do this and so I did.”



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Today, Elnora owns twenty different bridal boutiques across the United States, as well as one in London, UK. She accredits the difficulties she has faced in her life for her success. Although the car accident was a horrific incident that Elnora still struggles with today, she also recognizes the positive outcomes that came about as a result of the accident. For example, Elnora said that if she had never gotten into the car accident, she would never have moved back to Alabama where she met her husband and began her bridal boutique. “People look at

bad things that happen and they focus on the negativity but to me it was such a blessing because it made me step outside the box. [I went from being] this girl from Alabama who went to SCAD to being this girl who starts a fashion now in her hometown.” Elnora’s grateful attitude and passion towards life is evident in the way she handles her business as well.

Although bridal wear is a business for Elnora, it is a very emotional time for her clients. One of the reasons Elnora is such a revered designer is because she has a keen sense of what the bride’s needs are. In fact, she said, “On [‘Bride by Design’], all the producers call me the ‘bridal whisperer.’ They’re like, ‘How do you know what she wants?’ I’m like because I’ve done this for ten years and women, we’re all the same.” Elnora’s ability to know exactly what the bride wants come from work experience and her listening skills. She said that she understands that this is a very emotional time for a bride so she just lets them talk as she carefully listens and understands what they need. “The thing I do is just try to listen. Just listen and be calm because planning a wedding and being a bride can be super chaotic so I just try to remain really calm.”

In addition to starting her own business in a small town, Elnora’s determination also shows in how hard she worked to get her reality TV show on TLC. After “Project Runway,” Elnora was approached by several producers to do a TV show. However, she just wasn’t interested in it until a producer from Los Angeles named Dana approached her about a bridal show and told her that she was going to be a star. Getting “Bride by Design” on air was no easy feat, saying, “It took us four years to get on a network. It’s a lot harder than people think. It’s not like an overnight success story.” Elnora said she lived with the motto that “if you want it, you gotta work. It’s not gonna be handed to you.” So she kept fighting until, in 2015, her show “Bride by Design” finally aired on TLC. Although Elnora is now a celebrity bridal designer, the part she says she appreciates the most about her work is how many people she gets to help and inspire. ■



STUDENT SHOWCASE

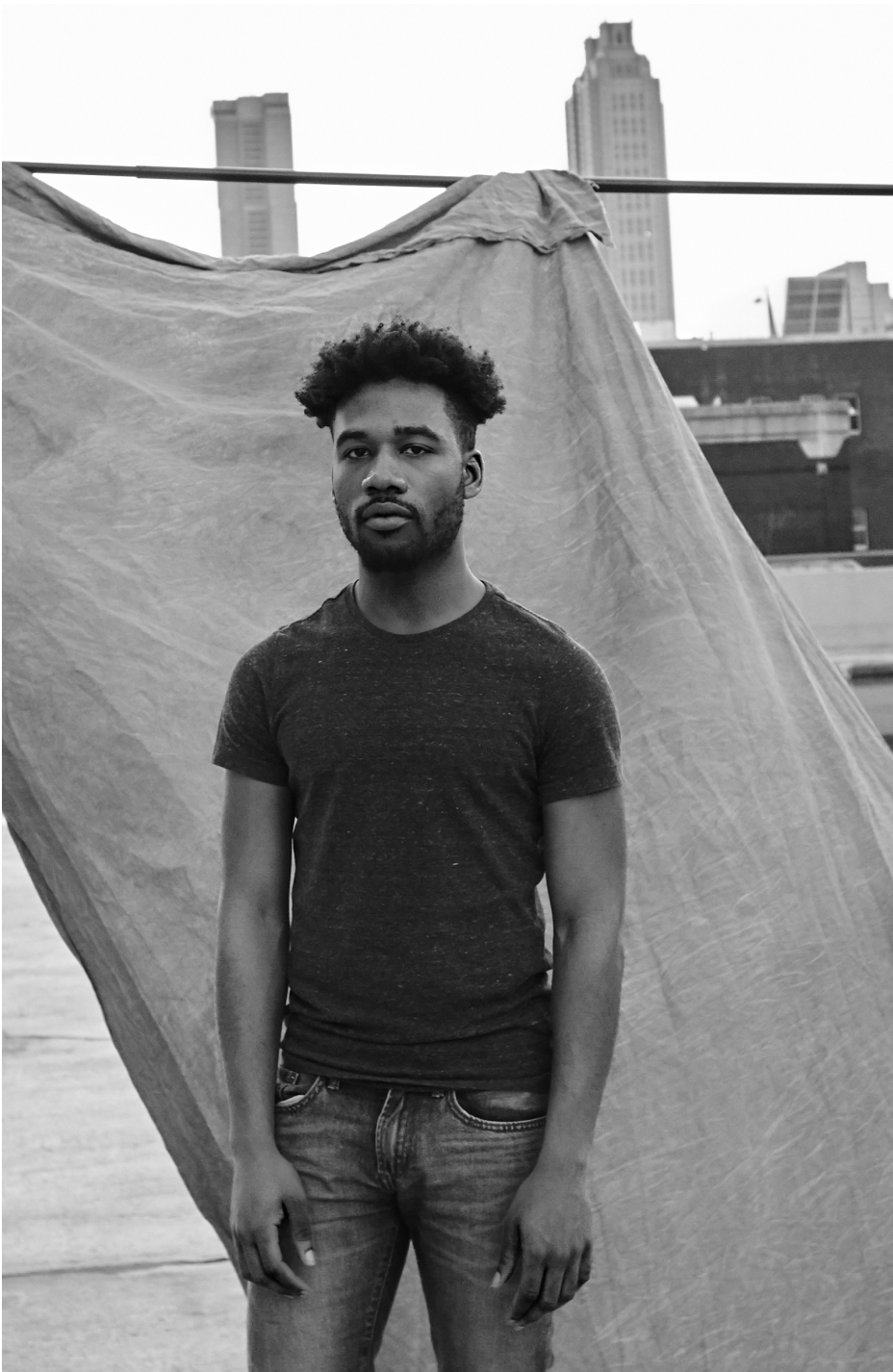
PHOTOGRAPHY

JOSHUA  
RASHAAD  
MCFADDEN

written by **ANANYA VAHAL**  
photograph by **CHRISTIAN CODY**

Since he was about five years old, it was obvious that Joshua Rashaad McFadden was going to be an artist. His mother encouraged his artistic interests from the beginning: “I got into the arts because of my mother, who taught me how to draw. She also got me my first camera,” says McFadden. Today, McFadden has inspired countless people with his photography. When McFadden moved as an undergrad from Rochester, New York to Elizabeth City State University in a small town in North Carolina, he says that he knew he wanted his art to tackle deep-rooted social issues and to educate others.

Once he became interested in photography during his senior year, he began his award-winning project Colorism. In McFadden’s own words, “Colorism basically is the discrimination against one another based on skin tone



within the same race.” He wanted to expose this issue because it greatly affects women in the African-American community today. In 2012, McFadden submitted three portraits of black women from his Colorism project to an exhibit in London. To his surprise, he won ‘Best in Show’ in the exhibition. He said this gave him the confidence to know that he had recognizable talent and that the subject matter his work touched on was important to the world. He graduated with his B.F.A. from Elizabeth City State University the same year.

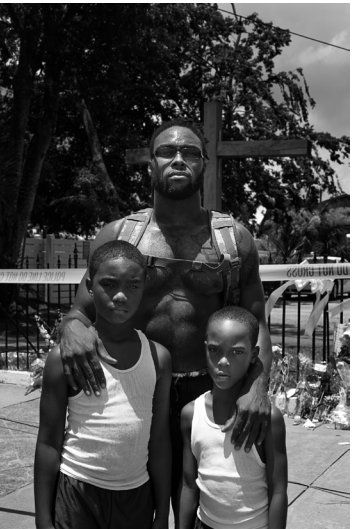
McFadden heard about SCAD when one of his professors from ECSU left to teach at SCAD. He decided to apply to the SCAD photography program as a graduate student and said he was elated when he found out he was accepted. He started school in 2014 and continued to work on his Colorism project to tell the stories of the women he photographed. He took over fifty portraits of women looking directly into the camera. To capture true emotions in their facial expressions, he had conversations with them about their personal experiences with colorism and photographed them immediately afterwards. Although today this issue affects both men and

women in the African-American community, McFadden picked women for this project because he believes that men and women deal with this issue in completely different ways. “From personal experience I think men react to colorism differently than women in a way that men don’t talk about it,” McFadden says, “So I think the way [to] go about doing the project, I would have to attack the subject in a different way than women.” He plans to address the way colorism affects African-American males in a future project.

The intensity of the photographs is apparent through the emotional reactions that viewers have to them and McFadden has witnessed this affect many times. “When it’s displayed I always get these very, very bold reactions. I’ve had multiple people cry because of seeing these

portraits and how they make them feel.” In August 2015, McFadden was commissioned by the Atlanta Beltline to install his work for six months. He received tremendous support from many women taking pictures with his photographs on the Atlanta Beltline and sharing them through social media to let him know how much they related to the topic and appreciated his work.

Then, another social issue that has recently come to the forefront of our society took hold



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of McFadden’s heart strings: police brutality. McFadden said he wanted to follow the path through which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led African-Americans fighting for civil rights from Selma to Montgomery, Ala. more than 50 years ago. The combination of McFadden’s interest in civil rights issues and the numerous killings of black males including Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and many more by police officers in the United States made this a personal mission for McFadden. “It turned into a movement and a fire within me to document all of these situations that have been going on in the south and all over.” He knew he had to go to Selma. To fund this spontaneous trip, he started a GoFundMe and managed to raise \$600 to help him while he spent a week in Selma capturing emotional moments. Not only was this a “life-changing experience” for McFadden, but in 2015 his After Selma project also won first place in the ‘Social Cause’ category for the International Photography Awards.

In his After Selma project he captured the raw emotion of the residents of the town and made this project another gut-wrenching experience for the viewers. Since these are heavy issues for McFadden as well, he made sure that he researched his topics in depth beforehand so he was as objective about them as possible. Although he has received many different reactions to the project, some of which he admits he wasn’t ready for, he also recognizes that with such an intense issue, “you don’t control how people react to it. You don’t control what people think.” Despite the tragic topic, McFadden believes that it isn’t all bad, saying, “You do see hope in the work. You do see rejoic[ing] in the work. And there is also a hint of pain.”

McFadden is now working on his thesis and hopes to graduate with an M.F.A. in photography in the spring of this year. The

Black Male Selfhood project which he began earlier at SCAD has now taken a forefront as his thesis. He hopes to expand upon the idea as he once again tackles an important social issue. After SCAD, McFadden hopes to be able to continue to create art about such issues. He admits that he would like to work for a major publication; however, his main focus will always be telling stories through his photography. He wants to be an inspiration and to “make work for a purpose or work with a purpose.” Although McFadden has many accomplishments under his belt, it hasn’t been an easy road. “As artists we get discouraged a lot because it’s tough and it has been tough but you just can’t stop. You have to fight for the work that you believe in.” McFadden’s reason for fighting against the odds is to be able to tell stories about people who themselves are fighting for their identity or basic human rights. He tells these stories because he believes in the power of photography. “Photography can change the world and I believe that it has.” ■