

style setter

In designer Esther Nash's boutiques, the fashion philosophy is "complete fun"

BY ANDY JONES



"Designing is like sculpting a piece of clay into a masterpiece," Esther says.

ESTHER'S ESSENTIALS

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| FOR GIRLS: | retro sundresses |
| WHY: | "Seventies patterns are totally fun" |
| WHAT ELSE: | ethnic jewelry |
| FOR GUYS: | glass or ceramic necklaces |
| WHY: | "Men have beautiful necks" |
| WHAT ELSE: | wrestling tanks |

tain golden dress — at age seven. "It was my favorite," she says. "And I had all these gold bows in my hair. When I wore it, I was so happy. That was the happiest time in my life."

Esther has never outgrown her love of playing dress-up. She started designing her own clothes as a high school freshman, and by the time she graduated, she had already staged five fashion shows. To save on the cost of hiring models, Esther walked the runways herself. Eventually, she became a pro model. But she soon decided that if she was going to be a walking billboard, she'd rather do it in her own creations than in those of other designers. "I didn't want to waste any time," she says. "I wanted to get started in the business."

So, with savings from modeling, baby-sitting and waitressing — and help from her mother, who owns and operates Brooklyn's Landmark Pub — Esther opened the Baby Doll in 1998. "It was my dream," she says. "My mother taught me to be very independent, so I did everything myself. I couldn't afford to hire anyone, so I had my friends come and help me paint. We had a few painting parties."

A year later, Esther opened Sugar Daddy just next door, expanding her mini fashion empire. Esther describes her swim and club wear as "a combination of James Bond, Las Vegas showgirl and Barbie." Some of her most popular looks are sexy sheer pieces that show off tummies and are highlighted with the razzle-dazzle of sequins, ostrich feathers and spandex.

Now, her clothes get exposure at Manhattan's Cheetah Nightclub, which commissioned her designs for its staff, while Esther manages the two shops and attends the Fashion Institute of Technology full-time. "I've become an insomniac," she says. "I'll just sleep when I'm dead." But Esther believes the long hours are worth it, to spread her gospel of "complete fun" in fashion. "People are way too boring and mainstream," she says. "They need some excitement in their life." ❊

Exhibit A in the argument against school dress codes: Esther Nash. At New York City's High School of Art & Design (Calvin Klein's alma mater), there was no code and Esther could express herself any way she liked. "I'd wear sequined gowns, Indian outfits, Japanese kimonos and hillbilly fun stuff," says Esther. "I've always enjoyed dressing up because it's like you're entering a whole new dimension."

Esther is becoming a major player in that dimension, having opened two successful Brooklyn shops that sell her clothing and jewelry designs: the Baby Doll Boutique for women and Sugar Daddy for men. She traces her career in the rag trade back to the day when she fell in love with a cer-

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