

# FUNCTIONAL



daniel dinsmore PHOTOGRAPHY



Ginny Bergerson with one of the models at Raw Fusion.



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BY GRACE BRANDT

In the grand hall of the Mankato Verizon Wireless Center, the audience waits restlessly for the show to begin. It's the annual Raw Fusion Fashion Show, one of the biggest events in Mankato. The grand hall is packed; nearly every ticket is sold. In the middle of the room is a gleaming catwalk, opening up out of a giant pink castle. It fits with the

year's "Candyland" theme. Some people sit in roped-off sections surrounding the stage, while others mill around farther back, unwilling to pay for pricier, better seats. As the music swells and the spotlight swings towards the catwalk, the first model appears. She struts down the

# RAW FUSION FASHION

stage, a giant lollipop in one hand. Her skirt is a kaleidoscope of colors, while her bodice is covered in mega-sized sweets like ice cream cones, cupcakes and candy canes. The outfit is undeniably attention-grabbing, but as audience members look closer, they see not everything is as it seems. That swishing skirt is made of PVC. The bodice is a mix of aluminum and expanded metal sheets. And that lollipop? The base is a steel tube.

The materials may sound odd, but they actual fit right in for this particular fashion show—which invites local businesses to create outfits for models using the materials they have on hand during their day-to-day work.



It's fashionable. It's functional. It's Raw Fusion Fashion.

## Starting something new

Raw Fusion Fashion began in 2010 as an idea of four women: Mary Kaus, Jamie Sorenson, Nicole Panko and Jen Swenson. The women were members of the Minnesota River Builders Association (MRBA), an area non-profit. According to Kaus, she and Panko saw a similar event in Minneapolis, which was hosted by the Interior Design Association, and they wanted to bring something like it to Mankato.

"It was so much fun, and the dresses were amazing," Kaus said in an interview with SCENE Magazine in 2018. "We thought we needed some sort of creative outlet like this in Mankato."

Kaus said it was challenging to start such an event because no one in the area really knew what to

think about it. In recent years, businesses rush to secure model spots and offer sponsorships, but the first year, organizers had difficulties finding participants and sponsors.

"Nobody knew what it was and what we were trying to do," Kaus said. "We'd just cold-call companies and tell them our idea and ask them if they wanted to be involved. Sponsorships were a hard sell being that it was a new event. Now, we don't have to really do any calls for sponsorships or models. People just come to us."

In fact, the event has had to cap its models at 30, though in 2018, they let one more model



squeeze in.

The first year, about 300-400 people came to the show, Kaus said. Compare that to last year, when nearly 1,500 people either participated or

The good news since every year, the show donates much of its proceeds to a different beneficiary. The first year was Habitat for Humanity, and last year was the Educare Foundation, which received \$33,000 from the event. Other beneficiaries included

## If you go

**WHAT:** Raw Fusion Fashion  
**WHEN:** Doors open 7 p.m. on May 10  
**WHERE:** Verizon Center in Mankato  
**COST:** Varies depending on the seat  
**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** <https://mnrba.com/raw-fusion/>

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## Award-winning designs

Ginny Bergerson has been involved with Raw Fusion Fashion since its first year - and her costumes have won awards in every show they've been featured.

Bergerson was working for the Mankato *Free Press* (and is now Southern Minn Regional Director of Magazines | Events) when she was asked if she wanted to enter a model in the first Raw Fusion show. She designed a wedding dress made out of newspapers, along with a groom's outfit made out of business magazines (which a coworker constructed while she worked on the dress). Finishing the costume took about 40 hours and "hundreds" of newspapers—and it was no easy feat.

"Newspaper's pretty difficult to sew on, so I had to make the paper sturdy enough that I could cut a pattern out of it," Bergerson explained. "I adhered the newspaper to that clear contact paper for kitchen shelves, then I'd cut it and sew it."

The hard work was worth it, though, since her design won Showstopper at the first fashion show. The next year, Bergerson won Showstopper again with a full-figured dress that incorporated newspapers and other office supplies. Then she won the "Shades of Shimmer" award with a pink butterfly costume made out of film and newspapers—and featuring eight-foot-tall wings. ("She was one of my favorites," Bergerson recalls.) After that came a People's Choice Award for her "Dark Forest" model, who was "kind of a tree" and featured an outfit made of law books and old wills (at this point, Bergerson was consulting for a local law firm).

Bergerson said she keeps her eyes open leading up to the show to find inspiration and ideas. "Whatever company I'm representing, I try to put that twist into the theme," she said. "I also play with the product of the company. As far as the inspiration, I have a general idea of what the end vision is, but as I'm building it, it morphs into what it is."

She added that it can definitely be difficult to work with unusual materials. Her hardest project was the butterfly costume, since the wings incorporated thousands of yards of fishing line, dipped in glitter and wrapped around the frame, which her husband had built so that the wings could be perfectly symmetrical. They wanted the harness to be aluminum so it would be lightweight, which meant finding a local implement dealer to weld it for them. The model frequently had to come back for fittings to make sure the frame and wings worked.

"I've got a whole new respect for the Victoria's Secret models," Bergerson said.

Besides entering models, Bergerson has also acted as a judge and helped design stage props with her husband. For the Candyland show, they created a 20-foot tall tree that was wrapped in scraps of multicolored fabrics, with oversized candies hanging off it.

Bergerson said she isn't sure if she's going to enter a model this year or perhaps volunteer in some other way. But even if she doesn't, she still wants to attend because she enjoys the show so much. "I think [Raw Fusion] is one of the biggest, hippest events that Mankato puts on," she said. "It's really, really fun. Every year I go to it, I think, 'Holy smokes, I don't think I can compete anymore.' These people have really outdone themselves with the automated things they've gotten costumes to do. The MRBA keeps finding new ways to twist it up and make it more fun than the previous year. Every year, they seem to find a way to make it better and better, so I wouldn't be surprised if they do it again this year."

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the Backpack Food Program, Greater Mankato Area United Way and Partners for Affordable Housing. So far, more than a total of \$125,000 has been raised for local non-profits.

"It's increased every year," said MRBA Executive Director Amy Kolb. "We're hoping that will continue."

## Keeping it fresh

While this year marks the fashion show's ninth year, that doesn't mean spectators will just see the "same ol', same ol'." Kolb said the event's organizational committee works hard to put on something new and different every year.

"The committee is always looking at ways to push the envelope and come up with new

creative ways," Kolb said. "Our main goal is to give our audience a different experience every time, make it almost like a new event. We always just want to keep it fresh and shake it up."

One way the show stays fresh is how it has a different theme every year. Past themes have included Dark Forest, Cirque de Freak, "Are You Ready to Rock?" and Candyland. This year's theme is "Mythology: Couture of Epic Inspiration."

Kolb said the committee has been really trying to encourage entries to explore all the different mythologies, not simply stereotypical Greek or Roman

stories. She reviews entries to make sure there aren't any duplicates, and she has been impressed with the wide variety of costume ideas.

"This is a fun one," Kolb said. "It's very different. People are doing a really good job thinking outside the box and going beyond the typical mythologies."

The theme plays into each year's awards as well. Every year, a panel of judges chooses costumes for certain awards, from People's Choice (audience members are encouraged to text their favorite choice to the judges) to Showstopper to Most Wearable. There is usually an award that goes with the theme, too, such as the "Shades of Shimmer" award during the 2013 "Shades of Shimmer" show.

In recent years, the show has also started



to include other types of entertainment, such as acrobats or live music. Kolb added that even the décor is heavily considered to make sure the “look” is different from year to year, whether that’s building a giant pink Candyland castle or an ominous tree that reaches to the ceiling to go with the Dark Forest theme.

“I hear people say, ‘You have to be there to experience it,’” she said. “It truly is a complete experience.”

### Preparing for this year

Kolb said work began on this year’s show in the fall of 2018. In fact, models had already signed up before Christmas. By the time of her interview with *Girlfriends* in early February, 27 models had signed up.

Putting on an event this large takes many, many volunteers. In addition to MRBA members, people from the community also volunteer their time,

### This year’s beneficiary

This year’s Raw Fusion Fashion beneficiary is the Jonathan Zierdt Cancer Fund. Jonathan Zierdt has been a major influence in the Mankato community during his time as CEO of Greater Mankato Growth, but he recently stepped down from his position as he deals with a cancer diagnosis. Zierdt has candidly shared his cancer journey with Mankato in the hopes of encouraging others who face similar challenges.

Zierdt and his wife established the Jonathan Zierdt Cancer Fund in 2017 as a donor-advised fund of the Mankato Area Foundation. In January 2018, they launched the JZ Caring Box program. Boxes are designed for patients diagnosed with cancer and contain items to provide support and comfort as well as access to information and resources for patients, their families and caregivers. The JZ Cancer Fund anticipates distributing 1,200 Caring Boxes this year.

“Jonathan is such a prominent figure and gives so much to the Mankato community, so we’re so excited to bring awareness to his cancer fund and the good work they do,” Kolb said.

and so do members of each year’s beneficiary. In fact, one of the requirements to be chosen is guaranteeing at least 12 volunteers to help at the event.

According to Kolb, the relationship often doesn’t stop after the beneficiaries receive their donations.

“We’ve got people who have been beneficiaries in other shows who still come back and help us, because they get that it’s such a unique and amazing event,” she said.

Besides the countless volunteers, MRBA also works with area professionals, from the staff at the Verizon Wireless Center to local photographer Daniel Dinsmore, to ensure that each year’s show goes off without a hitch.

“We knew from the beginning that we wanted to go all out,” Kolb said. “The production, the sound, the lighting... We’re using the same equipment as people who set up for the [area’s] biggest concerts. It’s that caliber. It has been from the beginning, and it’s really paid off in people experiencing this amazing event that you don’t necessarily see in other places.”

*Grace Brandt is a wandering reporter whose home base is Mankato.*

