Designing for people with disabilities

Kerri McBee-Black wants to teach students how to design apparel with purpose

While outsiders may view the fashion world through the lens of glitz and glamour, people with disabilities too often go neglected and underserved. There’s a need for clothing designs that are both fashionable and practical for amputees, people who use wheelchairs and those with a variety of other disabilities, says McBee-Black, an instructor in the department of Textile and Apparel Management.

“Barriers exist for people with disabilities and clothing is no different,” said McBee-Black. “There are markets that provide clothing for people with disabilities, however, they are not mainstream nor do they typically follow current fashion trends and norms.”

Since 2012, McBee-Black and Allison Kabel, an assistant professor in the department of Health Sciences, have been mentoring students on how to develop clothing for people with disabilities. In class, students research the existing markets for apparel tailored to individuals with disabilities. After students conduct market research and forecast clothing trends, they create 2D graphics of their clothing designs to present to class. Students also watch videos of focus groups featuring people with a variety of disabilities from around the Columbia community, learning the barriers people with disabilities face in finding appropriate clothing.

“One of the points that the students were challenged with was to make clothing that is fashionable and trendy but would accommodate limited mobility,” McBee-Black said.

In fall semester 2013, junior Anoria El Safadi’s group set out to develop trendy but affordable clothing designs for wheelchair-bound men ranging from 25-to-35 years old. The group designed dual fabric jeans — raw denim in the front and a faux-denim spandex-cotton blend for the backside to ensure comfort. All of the group’s jacket and sweater designs incorporated a particular type of sleeve that will not get caught in a wheelchair’s moving parts. Since they were designing a fall collection, all the clothes were warm but comfortable, El Safadi says. “It was challenging. We definitely had to think outside the box.” In the process, she says, the class began to understand the dearth of clothing options available to persons with disabilities.

Currently a junior studying journalism, El Safadi says she plans to someday write about the fashion and design world. “Even if I don’t go into design, this project helped me understand a whole new issue in apparel development that I wasn’t even aware of before,” she said.

So far, more than 80 MU students have participated in the project. McBee-Black says the project is not focused on apparel design but on contributing to the body of research into the barriers faced by people with disabilities.

“We will be able to continue documenting the apparel-related barriers faced by people living with disabilities, link these barriers and environmental factors to patient outcomes and begin exploring the use of Universal Design to develop apparel items,” she said. McBee-Black and Kable recently received a Richard Wallace Faculty Incentive Research Grant to continue their research.

“There are markets that provide clothing for people with disabilities, however, they are not mainstream nor do they typically follow current fashion trends and norms.”

KERRI MCBEE-BLACK