

Paralympian creates 'fashion-able' clothes

By Andrea Lavigne
News staff

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Most clothes made for standing around not sitting in, says designer

Teri Thorson doesn't think people in wheelchairs should have to choose between fashion and function. The former Paralympian is launching her own line of clothes for people in wheelchairs that are stylish and comfortable.

"Since I've been in a chair, I've struggled to find clothing that fits me properly and still looks good," she said.

The Victoria resident suffered a spinal cord injury after a car accident in 1996.

Only 24 years old, Thorson was vacationing in the outback of Australia and spent two months in acute care there before she returned to Vancouver.

It would take her another nine months at GF Strong Rehabilitation to recover strength in her arms.

Thorson, who didn't consider herself athletic before the injury, initially wasn't interested in joining "disabled sports."



Don Denton/News staff

Teri Thorson poses in her apartment with samples of clothes from other manufacturers that she likes. Currently in the design phase, Thorson is working on her own line of clothing, called "Normal?", for people in wheelchairs.

"It was the enthusiasm and support of my peers that got me into a race chair and I just instantly felt connected to it," she said.

She tried kayaking, skiing and rugby, but when she sat in her first race chair in 2001, Thorson found her passion.

In 2002, she returned to Australia to train for the 2004 Paralympic Games, where she made the 400m race finals.

While she would like to continue racing, her hopes of competing at next year's Summer Paralympics in Beijing are being sidelined by a wrist injury.

"It could just be overuse, but I didn't want to mess up the rest of my life of being independent, so I've taken this break and I'm just going to focus on this next dream."

Since high school, Thorson has wanted to be a fashion designer, but the lure of a lucrative career in software engineering got the better of her in college.

Now with time on her hands, she's ready for the next challenge.

Thorson has put together several designs and is looking to work with a seamstress to make the paper designs come to life.

People in wheelchairs have different needs, she said.

Low-rise pants show too much in the back and rise too high in the leg. Also, underused muscles can atrophy – so a thicker cloth or jean that has a bit of stretch is preferable, she said.

Thorson intends to focus on designing casual clothes for women, but eventually would like to expand to include evening wear and men's clothes.

Her line will be called "Normal?"

"I always think, 'what is normal?' When I first got hurt, all I wanted to do was be normal again, and upon living as a person in a chair and accomplishing more than I have before my injury, I thought this is my normalcy. There are many people out there who don't have a physical disability but are living with some kind of trauma in their own lives, so what is 'normal?'"

Thorson, who also serves as a Rick Hansen Wheels in Motion Ambassador, plans on launching her line this fall.