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She Doesn't Sound Like a Fashion Executive

By Jocelyn Fujii
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Eleanor McMillen

Eleanor McMillen walked into the lobby of the Kahala Hilton Hotel yesterday looking very much like the fashion executive she is—tall, beautifully groomed, wearing an exquisite navy blue pantsuit and carrying a wide-brimmed Adolfo hat.

But instead of the usual fashion dialogue on the ups and downs of the industry and the here and there of the hemline, the executive director and secretary of The Fashion Group's 30 international chapters embarked upon a lively discussion on the drug problem, intercultural relations, changes in life styles, social involvement.

As a wife, mother, and leader of 5,000 women around the world, Miss McMillen, in private life Mrs. Niels Olsen, is actively involved in all these areas, trying to promote fashion as a cultural tool instead of a commercial showcase.

"I'M NOT A JOINER, I'm not an organization woman at all, and yet here I am," she commented. "And I'm thoroughly impressed with what women can do and what organizations can do."

Miss McMillen arrived with her 14-year-old son, Peter, from San Francisco Wednesday night after discussing plans for a museum area and a tricentennial show with the regional group there. Before that, she was at home in New York tending to the Fashion Group's new project of providing and establishing a halfway house in Harlem.

Hawaii is her second stop on a tour of the regional groups around the world—in Tokyo, Sydney, India, Turkey, Greece, and Europe.

While here, she spoke to fashion executives and to the local Fashion Group in a luncheon meeting today at the Outrigger Club. The focus of her lecture was to be the

radical changes in society and their relation to the clothing industry.

But active community involvement is as much a goal of the Fashion Group as the development of the industry. The Harlem project is an example.

"It got started when it became known that some of the members had teen-age children involved in the drug problem in New York," she recalled.

"As an organization, we tried to get involved. We discovered that there were many girls under 16 who had no place to go, whose parents didn't care, who felt rejected.

"So we're making funds available so the fashion industry can buy a building in Harlem which will house 40 to 50 girls. They can live there, sleep there, and during the day they can take care of another 40 or 50 girls.

"They can stay there and go through different levels of rehabilitation, working themselves up to what they call 're-entry'—into society. They would then find a job, or go to school, until they prove themselves."

The primary purpose of the house, she explained, is to do something for the youths already hooked on drugs, as well as to prevent others from making the same mistakes.

AS WOMEN WITH FAMILIES and professions outside of membership in the Fashion Group, the members are very much concerned with such social problems.

As Miss McMillen put it, "They've all got their own homes, and I hope their families do come first. After all, we're women and mothers too."

The group's membership, of course, is limited to women.

"In New York I get some very indignant men who want to become members but who aren't allowed to," Miss McMillen smiled. "We love men dearly, and we won't

neglect them, but no man would put out as much work as the women do."

The women work, she believes, because of their firm belief that fashion has depth—as a language, as a cultural expression, as a representation of different life styles.

"There's a language to clothes, to fashion," she commented. It represents how you feel about the world, about how people live.

"It exists not only in clothes. There's fashion in food, in living, in decor."

As an expression of social changes, she said, fashion was destined to undergo the present revolution. "I think the change in skirt lengths, in silhouette, had to come about—clothes lined and constructed and the little girl look don't represent our way of life now."

"In times of such violence, of changes in value, why shouldn't clothes change? All this emphasis on slim bodies and diets—it's all a part of our present life style."

"It used to be that you wanted to look like a lady, and preferably like a rich lady. But no one wants to look like a rich lady anymore."

The catalyst to the change in fashion, she believes, is youth, the hippie movement, the current glorification of obsolescence.

"It all comes from the kids," she said. "From the hippie look, but dressed up and clean. The designers' inspiration is coming from young people, and from Army and Navy stores."

So much for the present, but what about the future of the industry?

"I don't know whether people will be wearing clothes at all. If not, there'll always be body paint," she laughed. But it's more comfortable to wear clothes, so there'll always be an industry.

"Besides, the basic urge is self-adornment."