

# AVENUE



Rosanna Krekel

## Fashion Central

*A global fashion network puts Charleston on the map*

BY JENNIFER BRAY | PHOTOS BY HOLGER OBENAU

Get over it Gisele. No more tears Tyra. Can the crankiness Cindy. There's a new fresh-faced cover girl prancing and dancing down the world's swankiest catwalks.

Her unique beauty combined with a fetching lack of pretense is winning her

legions of fans in the fashion world.

This steamy Southern belle is proving that Givenchy and grits, Chanel and shrimp, Herrera and humidity combine together as effortlessly as sweet and tea. Meet Charleston.

In just the past year, this small Southern city is transforming itself into a big league

player on the global fashion stage. That's due to the Herculean efforts of one very determined Lowcountry businesswoman. Transplanted here by way of the Big Apple, Rosanna Krekel is determined to shape Charleston into an international fashion and design Mecca.





Suzanne Allen

“There’s an old-world charm here in Charleston which is unique in this country,” says Krekel. She is the founding regional director of Fashion Group International, Charleston. Under Krekel’s vision, the local nonprofit, which counts more than 60 business members among its ranks has taken flight.

### Global Connections

The goal of Fashion Group International (FGI) Charleston is to be the authority on the businesses of fashion, including apparel, accessories, jewelry, retail, interior design, beauty and education, and to help its members become more effective in their careers. FGI provides insights on major trends through its events and gives those in the industry unrivaled access to business professionals in the marketplace.

It’s an ambitious undertaking. Along with Charleston, there are only 35 other spots on the planet that have been granted Fashion Group International status. That gives members in the Holy City a vast Rolodex of contacts with others in FGI. “It lets members take advantage of opportunities worldwide as well as locally,” say Krekel.

Krekel’s rich background working in marketing, advertising and publishing in New York City gives her access to a wealth of talent. She lives on Sullivan’s Island now, where she runs her other business, La Vita É Bella, a marketing and consulting company. Combining a Big Apple background with a Lowcountry home base allows her to reel in potent and powerful connections.

Krekel recently brought together a cast of fashion gurus that included Cator Sparks, the editor of LookBook.com and columnist for the Huffington Post; Karen Giberson, president of The Accessories Council; Edward Cortese, the fashion manager of Departures Magazine; and Stacy Smallwood, the owner of Hampden Clothing. The FGI event was held at The Hippodrome and gave members a glimpse of its Best Of Fall/Winter 2012 International Collections. The four industry experts, along with Krekel, discussed the top trends in fashion, beauty and accessories presented in Paris, Milan, London and New York. They also took questions from the audience. Events like



Soteria Kontis



Stacy Smallwood

this one are the type of unique programming FGI is bringing to Charleston.

Attending New York's Fashion Week is "about getting inspired again," Smallwood told the audience at The Hippodrome. "I love it and I bring that excitement back to my customers."

### Fashion Disciples

Smallwood's passion for high fashion is evident as soon as you step into the cool, chic space that is Hampden Clothing ([www.hampdenclimbing.com](http://www.hampdenclimbing.com)). Located at 314 King Street, it is just a stone's throw from the Apple Store across the way. This is prime shopping ground. King Street has, in fact, earned the title as one of the Top 10 best shopping streets in the country.

On a sweltering day, the store staff is busy helping several shoppers. Hip music surrounds the customers, who are offered cool drinks while they browse such coveted labels as Alexander Wang and Timo Weiland.

"It is so rewarding to me to have seen talent in a young designer and watch them grow as a brand. I love discovering the newest, emerging brands and introducing them to the South," says Smallwood.

When it came to joining FGI, however, Smallwood had reservations. "I fought tooth and nail," says Smallwood. "I just have so much to do with the store. I am so busy. But the selling point for me was meeting Rosanna. She was relentless! And she believed in my store and she knows what she's talking about. She really does have great connections," Smallwood says.

One of FGI's newest members is making it happen, one bead at a time. Soteria Kontis, the owner and designer of Dixie Dunbar Studio ([www.dixiedunbarstudio.com](http://www.dixiedunbarstudio.com)), takes beads made out of brass, bone or wood, disappears into the jewelry lab and—bam!—a gorgeously crafted necklace or vintage pair of earrings emerges from her talented fingertips.

"Once, a customer walked in, took a look around the shop and said, 'You must have multiple personality disorder.' I laughed and said, 'Thank you very much,'" Kontis recounts with a grin.

The gifted designer has been crafting

original designs at Dixie Dunbar for the past 11 years. The sparkle and shimmer of her work lure customers off King Street and into the charming shop with buttercup yellow walls. A fanciful mix of materials that include red jade, pyrite, pearls, gold and silver, to name just a few, have earned her many fans and a write-up in *Vogue Magazine*. She describes her style as modern eclectic.

Kontis is dedicated to her craft and has attended gem shows all over the world. As the sole designer of her studio, it can be a struggle to network at the end of the day. But that is precisely why she was encouraged to join FGI.

She learned about the organization during a home improvement crisis. An impulse buy of a red leather sectional was causing Kontis conniptions after the sofa was delivered, because the walls around it were green. "It was like constant Christmas—I wanted to cry. Instead, someone told me about Wall Candy and Suzanne. I called her and she came over. Right away she said, your walls need to be turquoise, and I was, like, 'Of course, they need to be turquoise!' And we've been friends ever since."

### Beyond Fashion

The broad brush of Fashion Group International extends to interior design as well. Suzanne Allen is the owner of Wall Candy ([www.wallcandy.us](http://www.wallcandy.us)), a design and production firm in Charleston specializing in custom finishes for walls, furnishings and accessories.

This talented artist trained in New York and now performs nearly magical make-overs of homes in the Holy City, Kiawah and beyond. Allen is recognized as one of Charleston's Most Influential Home + Design Professionals. It was while Allen was decorating Krekel's home on Sullivan's Island that she learned about FGI and became intrigued by the possibilities it offered.

"Charleston is a very insular city, and it felt very closed 17 years ago. The thing Rosanna is doing with FGI is bringing people together. She's really taken Charleston on, and I applaud that," says Allen.

Standing in front of a wall coated with

paintbrushes, all perfectly feng shui'd inside the enchanting rabbit warren of rooms that make up Wall Candy, Allen grabs a brush.

"For me, I really enjoy the parts of FGI that fuel my creativity," she gestures to a table she is resurfacing. Later she shows off a pillow that she painted right over. Its strange green color looks just perfect against the background of the chair. "Remember, anything can be resurfaced," says Allen, laughing.

Taking a last look around the jumbled colorful chaos that fuels the nerve center of Wall Candy, from the cardboard elephant head on the wall to the red foil tracings of candlesticks taped nearby, Allen sums up her philosophy. "I try to be a muse for people trying to find inspiration for design—the reward is when you make it happen."

Growing FGI and the relationships that evolve from it is incredibly gratifying to Krekel. Her plans for Charleston are just beginning. "One of the immediate goals is to move FGI to office space in the heart of the city. The office space would be both a combined creative think tank and a business and information resource for the fashion industries in Charleston," she says.

For more information about FGI Charleston, membership and upcoming events, go to the website at [www.charleston.fgi.org](http://www.charleston.fgi.org). ➔

### UPCOMING FGI EVENTS

#### August 30

Members-Only Event at  
Cynthia Rowley

#### September 27

Interiors Event Covering Key Topics &  
Opportunities for the Design Industry

#### November 15

Spring/Summer 2013 International  
Collections Preview Event

#### December 6

The New Retail: E-Commerce,  
M-Commerce and F-Commerce

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