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## Fashion Group International lands in Charleston

### Going Global

by Maggie Winterfeldt

What do First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, cosmetics juggernaut Elizabeth Arden, and former *Vogue* Editor-in-Chief Edna Woolman Chase have in common? They are all founding members of the Fashion Group International (FGI), a professional organization established in 1928 for the purpose of advancing the fashion industry. FGI, however, is not a club for ladies who lunch. In the years since its founding, it has grown into a powerful and well-respected organization with a membership list that reads like a who's who in elite fashion — its ranks include Anna Wintour and Diane Von Furstenberg, just to name a few — and regional branches span from New York to L.A., Tokyo to Paris, and every notable fashion hub in between. The latest regional branch will be established here in Charleston.

For fashion industry professionals, a Charleston FGI branch is a thrilling prospect. Not only does it validate what we already know — that our community is a burgeoning fashion hub — but it gives Charleston a global network and support system to grow and develop our talented individuals and nurture the local industry. With oversight from this leading global organization, Charleston will hopefully be able to overcome some of the issues holding us back: a destructive insular attitude, an expectation that fashion- and design-related professionals will work for free, and a shortage of training programs and funding, all of which lead to dismal talent retention. This is to say nothing of the more basic needs, like a high quality fabric store.

While FGI is not set to launch until 2011, the buzz surrounding its impending arrival gained so much momentum that the group decided to hold an outreach event on Nov. 11. At the event, the FGI Charleston Board of Directors, led by Rosanna Giacalone Krekel, a fashion and publishing professional whose resumé includes stints at *Glamour* and *Elle*, introduced themselves and outlined a three-fold mission: to develop members' businesses, to bring top-level educational programs and training to Charleston, and to put the spotlight on the Holy City as a fashion capital.

Perhaps most ambitiously, FGI's long-term goals include turning the fashion and design industry into a meaningful part of Charleston's economy. "We're putting a whole business structure around [fashion and design related] organizations," Krekel says. "We would love the chamber of commerce to report what our fashion figures look like, and we would love Mayor Riley to get up and talk about what this means in terms of jobs and dollars because it is in an incredible industry."

Krekel's passion for the cause is contagious. "This city seems to be percolating. It's like a pot ready to overflow with style in every area of fashion," she says. This unwavering belief in Charleston's potential has kept the board — comprised of "pillars of the community" Krekel recruited, like fashion designer Anna Lassiter and Gwynn's boutique proprietor Marshall Simon — working tirelessly to bring FGI to Charleston since the idea seed was planted this summer. This was no easy undertaking, as FGI is notoriously discerning about who it will grant a license to, imposing rigid membership criteria. Adding to the challenge was the bad taste left in FGI's mouth from a Carolina branch (representing both North Carolina and South Carolina) that had its license revoked after failing to maintain membership standards.

Krekel explains, "FGI told me, 'If you can prove to us that Charleston is the kind of vibrant city you described in the areas of fashion, accessories, home design, and beauty, then we will go ahead and allow you to license.'" Krekel successfully demonstrated that Charleston's demographics, including everything from the average income to the number of business professionals, aligned with FGI branches around the world. The business plan was approved and a provisional license granted.

While the mere presence of FGI won't eradicate all of the issues hampering the Charleston fashion industry's growth, it is undoubtedly a major step toward overcoming them. No longer functioning in a vacuum, Charleston will be exposed to the critical judgment and global support it needs to grow, improve, and flourish.

**Tags:** fashion, Fashion Group International