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SMALL BUSINESS

A handful of economic sectors offer havens during a downturn
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PATTY HUGHES, volunteer coordinator, looked on as tents went up for Fashion Week.

Putting on the glitz

Nearly 1,000 fashionistas pitch in for big event

BY ADRIANNE PASQUARELLI

FOR MOST, September marks an end to summer's carefree reprieve of beach weather and relaxed vacations. For Alycia Randise, a 26-year-old Brooklyn resident who spends the year working behind the counter at Kiehl's pharmacy, September marks her return to the glitz and glamour of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week.

For the last five years, Ms. Randise has helped out behind the scenes at Bryant Park, at the shows of popular designers including Betsey Johnson and Carolina Herrera. Initially recruited by a cousin who is an alumnus of the Laboratory Institute of Merchandising, Ms. Randise now uses her vacation time to help monitor the press check-in desk for eight to 10 shows

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Fashionistas put on the glitz

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during the week.

"I love fashion, and it's a nice change of pace from what I do daily," she says. "It's always good to be around so many creative and interesting people."

Ms. Randise is one of 950 people, both volunteers and paid staffers, who help to pull off the eight-day extravaganza, sponsored by Mercedes-Benz and produced by IMG Fashion. The week typically generates about \$233 million for the city in direct visitor spending, according to the New York City Economic Development Corp.

Though many of the 950 staffers are student volunteers, several others, like Ms. Randise, use their precious time off from their regular jobs to feed their love of style and slake their thirst for new designs, while getting paid a nominal fee.

Many tasks

WITHOUT SUCH fervent fashionistas, the machinelike coordination of more than 70 Bryant Park events would come to a grinding halt.

"There's a lot of different layers of jobs that have to be done," says Fern Mallis, a senior vice president of IMG Fashion, who founded New York's Fashion Week 15 years ago. "It's like building a little city in the middle of Manhattan."

When Patty Hughes moved here after college a dozen years ago, she immediately started volunteering at the tents at Bryant Park. Be-

fore that year's week of shows had finished, Fashion Week's producers—then the Council of Fashion Designers of America—offered her a paid position each season as volunteer coordinator.

"They must have noticed my wild enthusiasm," says Ms. Hughes, who is in her early 30s and says that she loses 5 pounds on average during the September and February shows.

She now oversees an army of 450 volunteers, the majority of whom

'It's like building a little city in the middle of Manhattan'

she enlists through seminars at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Parsons the New School for Design, New York University and Marist College, along with networking sites such as Facebook.

Ms. Hughes and her staff set up name tags on seats, put together press kits and gift bags, usher guests to their seats, pick up trash and move sets. Though she's often too busy to even watch the runways, she does make a point to sneak a peek at the collection of Michael Kors, her

favorite designer.

A few years ago, one of Ms. Hughes' female volunteers even subbed as a model, wearing a striped menswear outfit at a Nautica show when the design company was short-staffed. The trick worked as comic relief for the audience, and Ms. Hughes could not have been more proud.

Stylish site

DURING THE OFF-SEASON, the Buffalo native runs Curvy Girl Style, a Webzine that offers style tips and insight to women different from those who model on runways.

Another volunteer-turned-regular, David Fernandez schedules vacation time from his job in the special events department at MTV for the September and February Fashion Weeks. He started volunteering in 1994, working four shows a year before the women's and men's shows were combined in 1997. For the past eight years, Mr. Fernandez has run the information booth, dubbed the Command Center, in the lobby of the tents. His is the first face to greet all show spectators.

"The most-asked question is 'Where's the bathroom?'" the 34-year-old says. Mr. Fernandez fields such queries and provides show directions and restaurant recommendations. He often coaches visitors through the pronunciations of difficult designer names, like Joop, which actually sounds like "yoap," so

RUNWAY NEWCOMERS

NEW DESIGNERS MAKING their runway debuts are hot commodities at this year's shows, running Sept. 5 through Sept. 12. SoHo-based Thuy Diep, a Vietnamese-born



Thuy Diep

designer known for her floaty fabrics, exhibited her spring line Sunday evening. In menswear, Sergio Davila, a Peruvian designer, plans to show his new line of sporty chic spring attire today.

Meanwhile, Leifsdottir, the new wholesale line from Anthropologie aimed at young female shoppers, will be featured on Thursday. Zheng Luo, who owns Omnia Luo Inc., an eco-friendly Chinese fashion company, will debut her collection, made from organic and natural fabrics, on Friday.



Sergio Davila



ALL NATURAL: A line of Zheng Luo's eco-friendly fashions will make its debut.

first-time visitors can seem more fashion-savvy.

Though many who assist behind the scenes do so for their love of the trade, others work for the camaraderie. Paul Soltys, a 50-year-old general contractor, has managed the in-house production crew of 60 for the past decade. He handles deliv-

eries, maintenance and the building and tearing down of each set.

"People see the glamour, but I don't think they realize the hard work and effort that it takes to produce it," he says.

COMMENTS?

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