Santa Cruz native chases modeling career in Chicago

Willow Faygenholtz's work began with serendipitous moment on the runway

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POSTED: 09/16/2014 04:59:01 PM PDT | UPDATED: ABOUT A MONTH AGO

Santa Cruz >> "The Sex and the City" women can move aside for a Santa Cruz native who's living a life as a model and choreographer in the real world.

Willow Star Faygenholtz, 25, is a full-time model, dancer and choreographer in Chicago. But she had humble beginnings in Santa Cruz, graduating from Forest High School before attending Cabrillo College from 2006 to 2009.

At Cabrillo, she focused on finishing her general education and eventually found a passion for dance. At the advice of a dance instructor, she began looking at schools outside California to study dance.

When she visited Columbia College Chicago, a small liberal arts school, it was a match, she said.

I hopped over there for a day one time during a spring break and fell in love with the city," she said.

Faygenholtz moved to the Windy City in 2009 when she transferred to study dance and choreography. Although she focused on her studies, her instructors encouraged her to network with other departments. She reached out to the photography students and volunteered as a model, if only to get some photographs to show at auditions.

"I kind of did some modeling with the college and responded to an outside casting call that wanted models and dancers," she said.

Although she thought she signed on to be a dancer and model at the show, when some girls didn't show up Faygenholtz ended up strutting down the runway a few more times than she expected.

"We still joke about it today because it was called the Exposure Fashion Show," she said, adding the name was symbolic of her introduction to the business.

From that show, she began to network with photographers and do amateur photo shoots. Modeling agencies and photographers would call her for assignments and she eventually showed up to one job that turned out to be for "Seventeen" magazine.

"I was so excited and I was like, 'This is the best day to miss school ever,'" she said.

She has a steady stream of work as models for various places, including on television shows sporting the latest looks and styles. She was featured on the cover of "VS Chicago," a Russian-language luxury magazine.

But it isn't all about the fashion shows and television modeling. She's putting her degree to use, teaching choreography to children and teens in a 12-week musical theater program. Also on the horizon is a job choreographing a music video for a Chicago musician.

As for advice, she encouraged anyone, particularly the children she teaches, to chase their dreams.

"It's given me that much more drive and passion to tell younger kids to keep doing what they want to do and do whatever makes them happy," she said. "That's what's going to help you be the person you want to be."