

## TAKING TRADITIONAL ATTIRE TO INTERNATIONAL CATWALKS - BLAZING TRAILS FOR NAMIBIAN FASHION

**Fashion designers study fashion trends and anticipate designs that will appeal to consumers. They oversee the final production of their designs before showcasing them in fashion or trade shows. Meet award-winning local Fashion Designer, McBright Kavari, whose captivating collections based on his trademark and elegant Otjiherero traditional dresses have earned him international fame. This is his story.**

### CHILD DESIGNER

Notwithstanding his current international acclaim, McBright Kavari comes from very humble beginnings. Growing up in the capital - where his mother raised him and five siblings - McBright's extraordinary talent manifested very early and once landed him in hot water, when he cut up his mother's expensive bedding to make clothes for a doll.

"I remember it so vividly. I was coming from school at Katutura's St. Barnabas Primary. My mom was angry at first, but I think after she looked at my attempt for a doll dress, her motherly instincts took over and she appreciated that somehow I just had to find a way to express myself", he reminisces.

Unlike boys his age, who looked forward to weekends to play soccer in the streets, McBright instead preferred to join his sisters on visits to the city centre. "I always wanted to tag along. And if I got lost, they knew where to find me. In front of the bridal shop called 'The Bride', which always would have these magnificent dress displays", he shares. "Looking back, I can say that it is in front of those shop windows where my dream started, and where I told myself that this is what I was going to do one day", he adds.

### TEACHER SUPPORT

Always being surrounded by clothes and dresses at his mother's home-based ironing and dry-cleaning business helped in shaping McBright's aspirations. However, he ascribes much of his success to the early support he received from his teachers. "I started to sketch designs. And one day, instead of paying attention and taking down classnotes, I was sketching some dress designs in my scrapbook. I expected a thorough scolding when caught out by my teacher, but got a compliment, instead", he recalls. "In fact, my teachers called in my parents and encouraged them to support me in nurturing my talent.

Their validation really helped. They even arranged for me to attend workshops to hone my skills and talent. And when I did, they would assist with extra work to ensure I keep pace with me schoolwork", he adds. The positive feedback and encouragement from his teachers also helped in convincing McBright's uncles, who were not very comfortable with his interest. "As



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I believe I have a responsibility to continue blazing trails for our country's fashion industry, notwithstanding the success and recognition, which came quite early in my career.

**McBright Kavari**

Fashion Designer

a young Herero boy, they expected me to learn about cattle and farming and to play with toy cars or play street soccer. My teachers' encouragement and my later success have convinced them otherwise. They're very proud of me today, and they support me now", McBright adds.

## **PUSHING BOUNDARIES**

McBright's stellar rise started when in Grade 6; he entered his first Herero dress design competition. Designing this voluminous Victorian-style dress and its matching horn-like 'otjikaiva' headscarf is not an easy assignment and McBright only managed to make it into the top 10 at his first attempt in 2006. However, he returned the next year and won the overall prize, which included a trip to Kenya. Further victories followed in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

"The Herero dress is special in our culture and steeped in so much tradition and heritage. For a Herero woman, it holds a lot of cultural pride. It captures her essence and reminds her about our customs and etiquette", he explains.

"I've been criticized for some of my modern interpretations of the dress and for pushing the boundaries. However, I prefer to interpret my designs as just a process of natural evolution. My designs still allow for the dress to retain its mystery and aura. No one can deny that my work has sparked a renewed interest amongst younger women. No one can deny that the Herero dress today enjoys international interest and acclaim. I went to Germany and a single buyer bought out my whole collection", he shares

## **INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM**

Although his young age prevented him from taking up the travel opportunity to Kenya, McBright's confidence in his own talent grew. "The following year I travelled to Berlin, Germany and I took part in the Shanghai Fashion Week. Not only were these amazing experiences, they were eye openers and got me a lot of exposure. The Niger Fashion Week was another incredible platform, where I had the opportunity to meet and interact with contemporaries from the African continent", he shares. McBright has also designed dresses for the Miss Namibia beauty pageant and crown holders. His modern interpretations of the traditional Herero dress also won him acclaim at the 2016 Africa Fashion Reception, hosted by the African Union Commission at its headquarters in Addis Ababa.

"I won a gold medal and outperformed renowned designers such as Lisete Pote from Angola and the eccentric David Alford from Zimbabwe. The standing ovation was a special moment. It was when I really got to appreciate that I had a God-given talent to do this, as I was outperforming the other designers who all attended advanced and highly-acclaimed training courses", he shares.



## **INNATE TALENT**

Good fashion designers have heaps of creativity and excellent visual acuity for detailed work. McBright possesses these skills in heaps. Taking the added pressure of co-steering his brand, 'McB's Classic Fashions' into his stride, it is in his studio where McBright is the happiest. Watching him plying his trade makes you appreciate the true talent of this young man, who has all but captured the fast growing and lucrative Herero dress niche market.

"I never attended a training college or participated in any formal training to do this. I was born to this. It's in my blood. It's like I look at the fabric and the design just comes to me as I sketch. It just happens. It's like magic. Then, not all designers are good at sewing. I'm a master behind the sewing machine. Self-taught", he explains.

"Often new clients get distressed when I practice my magic and just start cutting up the expensive fabric they bring in. And I do so, without even taking their measurements. This is another skill I possess: to just look at you and to know your dress size. But, all these new clients smile once I'm done and call them in to come fit on the final product. And they are sure to come back for more", he jokes.

## **TENACIOUS ENTREPRENEUR**

McBright's creativity is not waning at all and his impressive portfolio continues to grow. "Although managing my brand and business can become cumbersome at times as I'm not really the administration type, business is good, overall. I'm not complaining. We're busy and orders come in from as far as the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. The two seamstresses I employ are kept very busy. Our philosophy is simple - quality, originality and personalised service", he notes. "I continue to work hard on new collections, which I wish to take international to events such as the Paris Fashion Week. I believe I have a responsibility to continue