

Canadian fashion's fairy godmother

Philanthropist socialite Rogers puts up big bucks for budding young talent

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Pandemic or no pandemic, there's no keeping Suzanne Rogers' signature big hair down.

"I start the day with a blow dryer," she says of her lockdown beauty routine. "Some people meditate, I get my hair done." Right now she does it herself, of course. "It makes you feel good, it doesn't cost anything to get the curlers or the curling iron out."

Pandemic protocols deny me the natural lead for any profile of a socialite philanthropist: the microscopic dissection of her outfit.

Thankfully, reached by phone, Rogers cheerfully obliges: "Right now I am wearing black knit pants, a pink knit wrap top and minimal makeup." So, not sweats — whew, glad this isn't on Zoom. "I think people have the misconception that I wear ball gowns all the time, which is a fair assumption, as I'm often photographed in Oscar de la Renta. In real life, I do a high-low mix."

We are chatting now because Rogers — known broadly as the fairy godmother of Canadian fashion — made quite a donation recently. In November, the Edward and Suzanne Rogers Foundation announced a second \$1-million gift, a five-year extension of funding for the Suzanne Rogers Fashion Institute at the Ryerson School of Fashion.

The SRFI, as it is known, is a career turbocharger for emerging fashion designers as they transition from their degree into their careers, providing customized funding for what each designer needs. These financial needs have ranged from master's degrees in London to support for international competitions and internships, paired up with entrepreneurial insights, networking connections and mentorship.

But we know you're also here for the socialite tidbits. Rogers knows it, too, delivering a peep into her fabulous life because that is how she can best draw attention to the work of the fellows at the SRFI.

She is proud to be a fashion peacock, consistently favouring a more-is-more, ultrafeminine look. She told Toronto Life years ago her style icon was Truly Scrumptious from the wholesome 1960s comedy "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang."

Just like the royals, Rogers knows that what she wears — her annual wardrobe spend is oft-rumoured to be in the seven-figure range — draws attention, and cash, to the causes she espouses. Gala Suzanne is a role she slips into and the costumes take military planning: Rogers selects her wardrobe a year in advance with many garments commissioned for specific occasions she knows she will attend the following year. (No, Suzanne Rogers is not just like us, heaving our closets onto the bedroom floor 20 minutes before a big event, cursing and hating everything we own.)

Naturally, 2020 has thrown a curve into her calendar and her clothes-buying plans, same as everyone else's (aside from the outlet of the family's vacation homes in Lyford Cay, Bahamas and Muskoka, which can be glimpsed on her Instagram, along with location-appropriate vacation clothing).

"I still have the (gala) wardrobe from last year I haven't worn. I have the GRETA (Constance) boys do my CAFA outfits for me, for press and what have you," she says, referring to the Canadian Arts & Fashion Awards.

Greta's designers, Kirk Pickersgill and Stephen Wong, just get her, she says. "I'm a big ruffle girl. I love the bows, I love the jumpsuits. They've done many custom pieces for me and they know it's the bigger the better



GEORGE PIMENTEL FILE PHOTO

Suzanne Rogers at the 2019 Canadian Fashion Awards. The Edward and Suzanne Rogers Foundation has announced a second \$1-million gift, a five-year extension of funding for the Suzanne Rogers Fashion Institute at the Ryerson School of Fashion.

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But beneath the sparkle there is depth to Rogers' backstory and a legacy of scrappy hustle. Her life has been a mix of high-low as well and she is aware it makes her Cinderella story more relatable. Born in Elliot Lake, Ont., to Hungarian immigrants, she reminisces about shopping at Goodwill with her mom, and first encountering the posh world she now floats through while cleaning toilets at Muskoka's Cleveland House as a student.

The first ball she went to with her now-husband, when they met back at Western, was at his Sigma Chi fraternity formal dance.

"I went to get a dress from the \$20 bin at a vintage shop in London, Ontario. I didn't have the money to buy a \$300 dress. It made you creative." And yes, she did have the big hair back then. "It has been consistent for a couple of decades now. I was also a waitress at Kelsey's and I made sure I had money to get my hair done, I will tell you that."

Suzanne and Edward had two of their three children together before getting married 14 years ago. "I married Edward about age 36," she says, which means she is on the doorstep of a round-number birthday milestone. "I already had my own ways of doing things."

She had time to think about how her life would change when she married into the wealthy Rogers family. "I knew what I wanted to accomplish being married to Edward. I wanted to have my own identity, I wanted to be more than wife of, or daughter-in-law of," she says, referring to the late family patriarch and founder of the family business, Ted Rogers.

She says she began small. "I

started off reading to kids at Sick Kids Hospital library. When the kids were small, I would bring them with me. The hospital saw an interest, so I joined the committee for Scrubs in the City." That led to more young people's projects, like Covenant House, where she chaired a \$10-million campaign. The phone kept ringing and the thick packages of pitches from charities kept landing in her office.

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SUZANNE ROGERS
ON HER FASHION TASTES

The Edward and Suzanne Rogers Foundation began organically, too, and has grown exponentially over the past decade. Through it, Rogers is known for sponsoring creative awards — "success excites people," she says.

In 2011, Rogers created what was then a \$25,000 award supporting the most promising designers at the Toronto Fashion Incubator with TFI New Labels. More recently, she created a \$20,000 award for international development for designers through CAFA; past recipients have included Sid Neigum and Greta Constantine.

But it is Rogers' other major fashion project, a fundraising series titled Suzanne Rogers Presents, that has made her the most famous, while also raising a lot of coin: SRP, as it is known, has raised more than \$3 million for children's charities in the areas of health care, education and combating poverty.

The series of galas is a more

traditional socialite fundraising format — dinners or luncheons where mostly female power players and corporations buy pricey tables — featuring international fashion stars and a runway presentation of their latest collections. Since its inception in 2010, there have been five iterations, featuring Oscar de la Renta, Marchesa, Zac Posen, Diane von Furstenberg and Victoria Beckham.

As for the Ryerson gifts, she says, "I started going to the runway shows of these graduating classes and I thought, 'What's the next step? Where do they go?' All that talent was getting lost paying the rent, paying OSAP and they could end up folding clothes at the Gap."

So, she concluded, "I could use my voice and the passion I have for the fashion industry to nurture talent. It was an experiment: if you build it, they will come." The reason she gave a second round of funding, she says, is that the leap of faith is working. "My investment has really paved the way to give these students a chance to shine on an international stage."

The SRFI is a big deal because the various levels of government in Canada offer little to no support of fashion as an art form. We have no graduate fashion programs, which are "the entry ticket to international opportunities and success," says Robert Ott, director at SRFI and associate professor at the School of Fashion.

They are necessary to become, for instance, a creative director of a major fashion house. "Money is the single biggest barrier," says Ott.

Thus far, 11 SRFI fellows have benefitted from the program. Ott says that despite the current retail crisis and pandemic job freeze, young creatives are

inspired by the fresh focus on responsible, ethical and sustainable practices.

Plus, Ott says, the students chosen for the SRFI are "influencing and inspiring the whole school."

The standouts include Michael Perelmuter and Julia Payton, a queer multidisciplinary design duo who collaborate under the name avrgbbs. Following an internship in London made possible by SRFI, they worked with another fellow, Alexandra Armata, on her MA collection, exploring authoritarianism in fashion for the fabled Central Saint Martins college in London.

"It goes without saying that the support has truly changed the course of my career," says Armata. Another fellow, Stephanie Moscall-Varey, adds, "I joined the SRFI at a time when I feared that I would never be able to explore my design potential."

She took the opportunity to show her sustainability focused work in an emerging talent competition in New Zealand and to complete her MA at the London College of Fashion. "And it allowed me to create my tangible dream, my brand, Moskal."

Yes, the accolades for Suzanne Rogers' generosity and philanthropic elbow grease are earned: she has done good and cool (and effective) things with the kind of big dollars most of us would find boggling if faced with the task of giving them away.

And on a micro-note, Suzanne Rogers succeeded in influencing me on this dreary, pandemic blur of a day. As soon as I hung up, I warmed up all the hair instruments I owned, showered and set about fixing my hair. Because big hair sounds like the balm.