

Dressed for Success

Southwest Florida has plenty of style thanks to Michaela Vattimo and her passion for fashion

by Beth Luberecki

As a child, Michaela Vattimo was like a lot of other girls her age. She could often be found outfitting her Barbie dolls and playing dress up with hats, gloves, jewelry, and other items from her mother's and grandmother's closets.

Today, the forty-two-year-old Vattimo

still loves creating ensembles for both herself and others. She understands the value of a good tailor and can walk into her closet with confidence, knowing that she has a wardrobe of pieces that fit well, look good, and can all work together.

A lot of other women prove challenged by this. Which is why Vattimo has made a career for herself working as a wardrobe and fashion stylist throughout Southwest Florida and beyond.

"If you're standing in your closet every day saying, 'I have nothing to wear,' and your closet is full, that's a problem and it's time to give me a call," she says. "Everyone has more important things to worry about. What you're wearing shouldn't aggravate you or be at the top of your mind. If your wardrobe is taken care of, and you're walking in your closet and grabbing what you know looks and feels good, then you're ready for the day and you can accomplish everything else you need to accomplish."

A Foundation in the Fundamentals

Tall, slender, and blonde, Vattimo, not surprisingly, modeled in her twenties. As her thirties approached, she decided to go back to school to study communications, with the goal of landing a job in marketing

and public relations. She did just that at Fort Myers-based Chico's FAS, starting out as a store-support assistant and working her way up to marketing/PR manager over the course of six years.

"The vice president who hired me said, 'You obviously are enthusiastic about fashion. You have a degree and you know a little about marketing. But I need you to learn about retail and customers and how garments are designed,'" recalls Vattimo. "I got the best education I could have received at Chico's. I would not be able to do what I am doing now without that corporate training. You can know all about fashion, but if you don't know how to work with people and have that service-oriented mind, you're not going to make it."

In January of 2009, Vattimo became a victim of the Great Recession, getting laid off from her job at Chico's along with a slew of her coworkers. Though it was a crushing blow, she decided to use that unfortunate event as the catalyst for striking out on her own. "I had already started acquiring some personal-shopping clients on the side, so I took that opportunity to build a Web site and to see what I could do on my own," she says. "Some people thought I was a little crazy, because the economy was so bad, but I knew that no one was hiring at that time. I thought that this was my opportunity."



Michaela Vattimo



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PHOTO BY DAVID LANTRIP OF JOHN DAVID STUDIO

For several years Vattimo has been putting together an annual fashion show at the Bell Tower Shops in Fort Myers, which recently expanded the event into an entire week of fashion-filled fun.

Vattimo classifies her first year in business as challenging. But she doubled her clients in the second year, mostly through word of mouth. And she quickly learned the benefits of getting involved in the community of Fort Myers, where she lived and based her business for six years before recently moving to North Naples.

"I found out how willing this com-

For fashion shows at the Bell Tower Shops, Vattimo has put together looks that range from cutting-edge to completely wearable.



munity is to help you and guide you when you truly embrace the community," she says. "I had time to get involved in organizations that I was truly interested in helping, and I realized how they became my family and helped me every step of the way. I never even had to ask for help. It was just one opportunity after another that not only built my business but also built my confidence that I could do this."

A Business Is Born

The Bell Tower Shops in Fort Myers became one of Vattimo's first clients, one she continues to work with today. She's put together the fashion show for the center's annual Sip in Style event for several years and played an instrumental role in helping it kick off its inaugural Fashion Week earlier this year.

"If I didn't see such talent in Michaela, we probably would not have expanded the fashion show to an entire fashion week," says Valerie Cope, director of marketing for the Bell Tower Shops. "She does an amazing job. She's got her act together from an organizational standpoint, but she also has this tremendous style."

That's helped Vattimo to send some memorable looks down the runway. "We consider the Bell Tower Shops to

"Michaela knows her clientele very well, and she brings a very sophisticated look to all of our branding. She's just really good at what she does."

—Michael K. Soulard, director of sales and marketing for the Glenview at Pelican Bay

be fashion forward, so we need somebody with a little bit of an edge," says Cope. "Michaela does some fun stuff; she doesn't just pair together outfits that are safe. One year was a 1970s theme, and she had some great argyle knee socks and hats, things that you wouldn't necessarily see on the streets in Southwest Florida but for the run-

way show made complete sense. She's showing people how they can have fun with outfits and putting together things that you wouldn't normally see in a store window."

"I'll put an obvious outfit together and then I'll add a little twist to it," Vattimo says. "Because I want some of the outfits to be, 'Oh, I never would have thought of that, but it looks great.'"

Her experience at Chico's helps her keep the Bell Tower's mix of merchants happy during both the planning process and when it's show time. "I work with each one of the store managers to incorporate their brand and what they want to show off, what's hot for the season and in their store," says Vattimo. "Then mixed in with that, I show some trends of the season that may not be as obvious when you walk into a store. It's important to me to keep a good working relationship with the stores, and because I was in brand management, I understand that it's important to each one of them to be represented correctly."

Vattimo has also styled and produced in-store events for Macy's stores in Orlando, Tampa, Sarasota, and Naples and served as a stylist for fashion photo shoots for publications like *Grandeur* magazine. "She's borrowed

pieces from me to use for her photo shoots, which always turn out fantastic," says Wende Gilmore, owner of Vamped Up Vintage in Fort Myers. "She's borrowed really beautiful fur caplets, head pieces, gloves, and hats. It's always something high-end that really says fashion and is unique. She's got a really good eye."

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Taking a Tailored Approach

For photo shoots and large-scale fashion shows, Vattimo typically deals with professional models. But she also proves just as adept at dressing women who don't strut the catwalk for a living.

Personal-shopping clients first fill out a questionnaire that provides Vattimo with insight about their lifestyle, interests, career, and favorite stores. "I find out what their needs are," she says. "Often they're in a different stage of life and they don't know where to shop."

Once she and the client have gotten to know each other a bit, Vattimo then goes through the client's closet, offering insight on which pieces to give away, which could benefit from a little tailoring, and which could be utilized in a better way. "A lot of clients are afraid that I'm going to come into their closet, completely throw everything away, and give them a style that is not them at all," says Vattimo. "Once they get past that I'm not Stacy [London, from the TLC show *What Not to Wear*] and I'm not

going to scream at them that they look horrible, then I have clients for life."

The closet consult is followed by a shopping session, during which Vattimo teaches clients the power of tailoring. "Women think that they should be able to walk into their favorite store and get that perfect fit, when each one of them has a different body shape," she says. "Men know the secret; they get all of their items tailored. It's worth investing \$15 or \$20 to get some of your favorite slacks tailored. Then you can walk in



Vattimo strikes a pose while working on a sales and marketing campaign for the Glenview at Pelican Bay in Naples.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALISON BEYER PHOTOGRAPHY

PHOTO BY ED CHAPPELL

your closet and know that those pairs of slacks will fit you perfectly.”

Vattimo typically pre-shops for the client, selecting options that might work and asking stores to hold on to them until she returns with the client to try them on. She shops everywhere from department stores to independently owned boutiques depending on the client’s tastes, budget, and lifestyle.

“Because of how the economy affected me, I’ve tried to really find local boutique owners and partner with them and open the public’s eyes to these boutiques, because they are owned by people in the community trying to make it during an economy that was so difficult,” she says. “But I’m going to take my clients to the right stores that will

coordinate with pieces she already owned and advised her on how to get other garments tailored. “I’ve saved some really nice clothes that I just wasn’t wearing, and she’s taught me a lot about accessories,” says Stewart. “I have always loved clothes, but I think I have more confidence now. I’m enjoying putting things together in new ways.”

After seeing Vattimo in action, Stewart’s husband even asked her to overhaul his wardrobe. She went through his closet and helped him purchase some new sport coats, shirts, and slacks. “I really had not bought any clothes for probably four to five years,” says Dr. Steele Stewart. “I think the big thing for me was having her organize the direction I went in initially and to have the contacts

just really good at what she does, and I would highly recommend her.”

Vattimo’s recent move to North Naples has helped her grow her client base, which was already larger than some people might have expected. “There’s a pretty good market here for my services, and I think it surprises a lot of people,” she says. “Now that I’m working with some Naples clients, it always surprises them that I’ve worked so much in Fort Myers. I guess the thinking is that there aren’t that many fashion opportunities in Fort Myers, and there are. There’s just as much of an interest in fashion in Fort Myers as there is in Naples.

“But I would say it’s more of a lifestyle area than it is a high-fashion

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provide them with their lifestyle needs. Sometimes it is the stores they’re already shopping at, but most times it’s new stores they’ve never walked into and never even thought about, and it’s opened their eyes to look at shopping from a different angle.”

Vattimo never makes clients step too far out of their comfort zone; she wouldn’t force them into Forever 21 if Talbots is more their speed. “Michaela is very savvy about a person’s lifestyle and the kinds of clothes they want to wear,” says Reverend Nancy Stewart, a Naples resident and client. “Her judgment is very astute and very fashionable, but she really helps a person with their own lifestyle. She makes you feel very comfortable with whoever you are in your body and your age. It’s just such a joy to work with Michaela.”

Vattimo helped Stewart find items to

with people that she respected to guide me on the next round of purchasing.”

Vattimo first met Reverend Stewart when she worked as the stylist for some sales and marketing collateral for the Glenview at Pelican Bay in Naples, for which community resident Stewart was serving as a model. “Michaela was very professional and very efficient,” says Tim Kling, a Naples-based graphic designer and art director who oversaw the project. “She has a real talent for making the clothes dynamic but not overpower the shot. She makes the clothing tell a story, which is what you want for an advertisement. You want it to be a part of the scenery but not a focal point.”

“She knows her clientele very well, and she brings a very sophisticated look to all of our branding,” says Michael K. Souldard, director of sales and marketing for the Glenview at Pelican Bay. “She’s

area,” she continues. “The community loves to see a little bit of high-fashion mixed in with it, but more so they want to see something that’s wearable.”

That also seems to sum up Vattimo’s philosophy when working with personal-shopping clients. “You don’t have to look like a fashionista,” she says. “It’s all about fitting your lifestyle and accomplishing your goals throughout the day knowing that you look and feel good. You should be able to walk into your closet and know that everything in there works. That’s what I would like the end result to be.”

For more information about Michaela Vattimo’s wardrobe and fashion styling services, call 239-841-4151 or visit michaelavattimo.com.

Beth Luberecki is a Venice, Florida-based freelance writer and an editor for TOTI Media.

The outfits Vattimo creates for the fashion shows at the Bell Tower Shops showcase the merchants’ wares while also highlighting some of the season’s trends.



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