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BOLD



"FASHION PHOTOGRAPHER AND FOUNDER OF VERONA COLLECTION, LISA VOGL, PARTNERED WITH MACY'S A YEAR AGO TO CREATE THE FIRST-EVER MODEST FASHION LINE SELLING HIJABS IN A DEPARTMENT STORE INSIDE THE US. HER SUCCESS, HOWEVER, IS ONLY ONE PART OF HER IMPRESSIVE STORY.

**It's
and
BOLD
BEAUTIFUL**

By Ozgur Gozler
Photographed by Umit Taylan
Styling by Gizem Goktepe

Makeup by Seray Suveren
Hijab Style by Merve Bilgili

COVER STORY

LISA VOGL IS AN AWARD-WINNING INTERNATIONAL FASHION photographer and founder of the Verona Collection modest fashion brand. Just six months after launching Verona Collection, she opened a UK division, and then two years later partnered with Macy's, creating the first-ever modest fashion line selling hijabs in a department store inside the US.

Born and raised in Michigan, Lisa always loved most everything in the arts. After high school, she received her bachelor's degree in marketing and cultural studies. But when she realized corporate life wasn't for her, she moved to Florida at the age of 27 and entered Daytona State College's photography program. Because she had become friends with Moroccan students in her freshmen year in college and also stayed in Morocco for 3 months while working as a teacher at the American Language Center, she began to learn about Islam. Finally, in 2011, she asked to take her shahada and converted to Islam. She then began her career as a fashion photographer and worked with modest fashion brands across the globe while also raising two kids as a single mom. We sat down with the lovely Lisa to hear her story.

Can you tell us your story, starting with your childhood?

I was born and raised in East Lansing, Michigan. I have a large family as I'm one of six children (all girls and one boy). Although I'm not the youngest of the 6, I grew up as the youngest child as I'm the youngest of my dad's first marriage, and he later remarried and had 3 other children. Although my father was very much a part of my life, my mother was a single mother to us three girls: Heidi, Monika and myself. She worked extremely hard to provide for us and to teach us valuable life lessons. As a child I was basically a tomboy who was really into sports and activities. I played competitive softball and later went on to play in college, becoming nationally ranked. But I also had a very creative "feminine" side that

loved creating, whether it be fashion or photography. However, I never thought I would end up making it into a business. I just loved creating.

When did you first become interested in photography?

I think at a young age I always loved it. Just like most everything in the arts. After high school I went on to get a BA in marketing and cultural studies. I then went into the corporate world and realized it wasn't for me. At the age of 27 I picked up and moved to Florida and enrolled myself in the Daytona State College photography program. It was far from a conventional move, but I've never been one to play it safe. I take risks, give it my all and don't look back.

How and when did you first encounter Islam?

I first started learning about Islam when I was a freshman in college. I had made a lot of friends who were exchange students from Morocco. In fact through a connection I had made, I signed up to be a teacher at the American Language Center in Tangier, Morocco, where I lived for three months. While in Morocco, I lived with a local family, and there I abided by the local customs. I even wore full hijab, but it was purely out of respect for the locals. There was no religious meaning behind it for me. The trip itself didn't really teach me too much about Islam as I could barely communicate beyond asking basic questions in Arabic. However, it was an incredible experience that taught me how Muslims live and gave me an

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insight into their way of life. After my experience in Morocco, I returned home and graduated from college. I realized that working in the corporate world was not for me and that I was destined to work in a creative field. I enrolled myself at Daytona State College to pursue photography. While at school we were given an assignment to do—a 2-minute documentary of our choice. I decided to focus on “Why Muslim Women Wear the Hijab”. Through my documentary, I interviewed local Muslim women, and I was beyond intrigued with the information I received. It not only changed my perception of the hijab, but opened my eyes to learning more about Islam. From there I took it upon myself to read the Quran, listened to lectures, read books and spoke to numerous Muslims. I realized that everything I was looking for in a religion I had found in Islam. On July 29, 2011 I walked into a masjid and asked to take my shahada.

Did you ever second-guess your decision?

Not even for a moment have I questioned my decision. In fact, my deen gets stronger day in and day out. Anything I do, I do it with conviction. My mother tells me I’m stubborn but says it’s also what she loves about me because my beliefs won’t be swayed by anyone. Not even my family.

When did you decide to wear hijab?

Surprisingly, I started wearing hijab before I took my shahada as I knew I was going to convert, so I wanted to start to follow the rules of Islam. However, I wore it during the day, but I would take it off when I went to work at night. The first time I wore it to school, I was quite nervous, but I’m glad it’s something that I faced. I’m now very proud of my hijab. It’s my identity and a reminder to be a good Muslim every day. When I became Muslim it was at the same time that I was pursuing a career in fashion photography. I realized I no longer wanted to go towards mainstream photography as I felt it wouldn’t align with my values. So I began a career in the modest fashion industry. I didn’t do it because I had found a ‘niche’; I didn’t even know if I could make a career out of it. It was just what I believed was the right thing to do, so I went for it. And Alhamdulillah, so many

doors opened up for me, more than I could have ever imagined.

In 2015 you launched Verona Collection. What was the idea behind this enterprise?

In 2014, I met Alaa Ammuss, the co-founder of Verona. I had wanted to open a modest fashion brand for years but never made the big jump to do so. She had just launched a small brand at the time. Leveraging both of our skills, we decided to join forces. We spent around nine months developing a concept and worked through every detail. In February 2015, we launched our brand. We have come so far with our growth. Six months after launching, we opened a UK division, and then two years later we partnered with Macy’s and now sell online at Macys.com/Verona.

What were the business strategies which lead to the success of Verona Collection?

When Alaa and I opened Verona, we launched with only \$7,000 to start our business. We launched with 4 hijabs, 1 dress and 2 skirts. Our company took off better than we had hoped for, so every penny we made we reinvested into our business. We also participated in The Workshop at Macy’s, which is a business development program for women- and minority-owned businesses in New York City. Now, our staff has grown, and our product line consists of over 300 different products.

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How would you describe Verona Collection's fashion style?

I would describe our style as timeless and classic. However, in the very near future you'll see a lot of bright colors with unique prints being released.

What's the profile of your typical customer?

We have a very diverse customer base. Most people think that we sell only to Muslims, but there are so many customers who are in need of modest fashion. There are also customers who purchase not because of religious or modest reasons but just because they like the fashion.

Can you tell us the story behind the Verona Collection-Macy's collaboration?

Alaa and I made it our goal to become a successful company on our own merit, and then pursue a major retailer when we were ready. We knew it was a large task and something that was nearly impossible, but we're both very determined and hard-working women, and we weren't going to stop until we achieved our goal. In 2016, we found out about "The Workshop at Macy's", which is a week-long business development program for women- and minority-owned businesses. We decided to apply to the program, which is extremely competitive. During the week-long program in NYC, we sat through informative lectures, met with powerful executives, and most importantly, were given the opportunity to sell our products at the Macy's Herald Square flagship store. It was at this time that the buyers at Macy's were able to see, firsthand, the demand of the modest fashion market. Around one year later, on February 15, 2018, Verona Collection launched on Macys.com.

What are your future goals for the Verona Collection for the next 10 years?

We hope to continue to grow our brand and become more accepted for the modest fashion consumer.

You are also a single mother of two. How do you balance your work and life?

I became a single mother when Elias (Ilyas) was only one-and-a-half and Adam was six months old. At the time, Verona was newly launched and just getting off the ground. During the day I would take them out to the park or to the YMCA to keep them entertained, and during their nap time and at night I would work. I was in a position that I had no option but to make it. I gave it my all, and then some. I had two boys whom I had to take care of, and they were, and always will be, my motivation. I don't want to make it just to provide for them; I want them to see firsthand that when you put your mind to something you're able to achieve whatever you want. However, it wouldn't be fair if I didn't give a lot of credit to my mom, who helped me with so much. She bought me a car and bought my boys car seats, strollers and other necessities. My life since then has gotten a lot easier as they are now five and almost four, and Verona has come so far. They go to school during the day, so during that time I get as much done as possible, and after they go to bed at night I work even more.

What is your advice to hijabi girls who are future photographers, entrepreneurs, and designers for achieving their goals and making their dreams come true?

If you want it, go for it. The only one standing between you and your dreams is yourself. 📌

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