

Downtown fashion, then and now

by PEGGY PORTER



Hilda Godwin was dressed comfortably for our interview in a pair of well-worn sweats....

Just kidding! Hilda Godwin wouldn't be caught dead in sweat pants and isn't sure why anyone else would be, either. Instead, she looked flawless in a black turtleneck sweater, belted black trousers and eye-catching jewelry. While she describes such an outfit as 'casual,' she isn't against jeans and wears them, also.

But no elastic waists, ever, and she either wears a fitted shirt, tucked in, or wears a belt – the same advice she used to give customers at her eponymous store, a downtown institution from 1982-1998. Too loose clothing, she says, not only doesn't flatter, but allows pounds to creep up unnoticed. She must be right, because she's tall and trim, like the fashion model she was in her younger years.

Born and raised in Wilmington, Godwin started working in the fashion industry as a teenager, and worked even during the years she was moving around the world as the wife of a career Army officer. When he retired, the couple settled in Wilmington, where Godwin went to work as fashion director for the Belk-Beery group of stores, 26 stores in N.C, S.C, and Ga. She investigated and introduced new designers, arranged fashion shows, and monitored which clothing lines were best suited to individual stores.

After leaving Belk-Beery she did freelance consulting. "When I began to feel like I was in the air more hours than an airline pilot, I decided it was time to do something else," she says.

Something else turned out to be Hilda Godwin's, an upscale women's clothing store which specialized in wedding,

debutante and other special-occasion apparel. It was located at 105 Market Street and was an anchor store in what Godwin and other merchants envisioned as a reborn downtown.

Downtown in the early '80s was characterized by neglect and blight. "There were lots of adult bookstores and boarded-up storefronts, but we had a vision for something along the lines of Winter Park, Florida: shops and restaurants on the ground level, offices and living space above, so that people were still on the streets in the evenings. We had high hopes and we had the nucleus – but we just couldn't stop the proliferation of the bars."

Godwin praises the city's recent beautification efforts and thinks the riverwalk is a resounding success, but believes downtown represents a "lost opportunity."

"I had a nice 16 years, though," she adds, "And I enjoyed them."

The industry changes like fashion

How has the fashion industry changed over time? Godwin is succinct: "The fashion industry, as I knew it, is gone."

New York used to be the epicenter of the industry and she made five trips a year. "Most clothes were made in the U.S., but then the big shift to overseas locations with cheap labor occurred, which brought chain stores like Target and Walmart into the clothing business."

That changed not only where people shop (she laments the passing of so many independently owned stores) and how they think about clothing, but how retailers have to buy.

"People don't dress the way they did. It used to be that people knew exactly what attire was expected at a particular function, whether it was church or a cocktail party. So people bought a variety of staple garments and usually planned to use them for several seasons. Now, people wear what they want and you see a much wider variety of outfits in any given setting."

The upside of this change, says Godwin, is the freedom to express oneself, but she wishes there was a bit more emphasis on



dressing up.

Godwin remarks that being a female in her business was neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. "I've always worked with men. Sometimes they were my bosses, sometimes I was theirs. I'm a pretty strong individual."

She also has a pretty strong opinion on the value of looking your best. A favorite "Hildaism" she used to share with high school students, when she gave talks on appropriate dress and behavior during job interviews, is "If you look like a slob, you're more likely to act like a slob."

Pride in oneself is reflected in one's appearance, she believes, and making that effort is a big booster of mental health. She emphasizes high quality material and workmanship, along with selecting garments that look good on you, rather than being a slave to the current trend.

"The Duchess of Windsor was an unattractive woman, but she always made a good impression because she had style." ♦

ABOVE: Hilda Godwin poses with husband Ralph in front of the Hilda Godwin store in its last year of operation, 1998.

contributed photo

OPPOSITE: "People don't dress the way they did," notes Hilda Godwin, who owned an eponymous store on Market Street for many years.

photo by Stephanie Moore