



ALWAYS IN FASHION

Haverhill business owner puts his industry knowledge to work through a high-end boutique, design camps for kids, sewing classes for grownups, and even body-image pep talks for frustrated women

By Kelly Burch • Photographs by Angie Beaulieu

Giovanni Capato was a veterinary student, a New York model and a jet-setting buyer for Bloomingdale's before a call from his son slowed him down.

"He said, 'Daddy, I'm sick. Come home,'" recalled the Brazilian native who speaks five languages. "And I realized that it was time to do my own thing."

Nearly two years later, Capato is running Reach Fashion on Wingate Street in Haverhill, his somewhat unlikely adopted community. He opened the business in September, 2012, which quickly was

regarded as a place to find high fashion at reasonable prices.

"People told me that I was crazy, that Haverhill was dead," Capato said. "But I have been surprised by my loyal customers."

And yet, running a boutique wasn't all Capato had in mind: "I wanted to share what I know," he said.

In January 2013, he founded the Reach Fashion Design Studio next to his boutique. There he offers fashion camps for children, sewing classes for children and adults, and even invites people to drop in and get creative under his watchful eye. ▶



Giovanni Capato works with students on their projects during a sewing class at Reach Fashion in Haverhill.

“We have people making pillows, people designing clothing. One woman just wants a dress with pockets” he said. “We are all unique, so we invite people to come in and create something unique.”

Capato’s belief that everyone can participate in the fashion industry was recently put to the test, when he began teaching a young adult with special needs.

“She thinks differently,” Capato said. “You have to understand who you are working with and let her try. I really listen and then decide where to go.”

Capato said the student’s mother was impressed by how much her daughter learned working with him. He would happily open his studio to others who might not typically find themselves inside a design studio.

“I love a challenge,” he said. “I like to think, ‘What are the possibilities?’”

Precisely that question led Capato to one of his most popular programs: Fashion Camp for school-aged children.

“I call them my fashionistas,” Capato said.

Over the course of a week, campers typically make a bag, a shirt, a headband, and a skirt.

ABOUT REACH FASHION

▶ **Address:** 63 Wingate St., Haverhill.

▶ **Telephone:** 978.372.1913.

▶ **On the web:** www.reachfashion.com or [Facebook.com/reachfashion](https://www.facebook.com/reachfashion).

▶ **Hours:** Monday, noon to 5 p.m.; Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Thursday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.; and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Although most students are happy with these projects, Capato encourages them to do what they want.

“The first day, I introduce myself, and ask them what they want to do,” he said. “It’s not up to me, it’s up to them. I want them to be creative as much as they can.”

On the morning at the end of their session, participants in the April Vacation Fashion Camp had a fashion show, displaying everything they made. Girls ranging in age from 9 to 15 twirled down the makeshift runway, clearly proud of their accomplishments.

“It’s something creative to take an old shirt,

cut it up, and make it into something,” said Sydney Marshall, 9, of Haverhill.

“This is an amazing opportunity where kids can learn to create fashion,” said Maureen Marshall, Sydney’s mom. “It gets people involved in the community and opens the city up.”

Jackie Martini, a local fashion designer who helps Capato run the camps, agreed.

“It’s great to have something so local,” she said. “You can do the same things locally as you can in the city.”

Parents appreciate the skills their children learn during Fashion Camp, too.

“Sewing is a lost art,” said Kristine Smith, whose daughter Aisling participated. “There is nothing like this locally for kids who want to be creative in a different way.”

Aisling’s father, Randy Smith, had equally positive reviews.

“This is something she can use her whole life,” he said.

Although sewing is important, Capato hopes his students take away a much larger lesson from their time in the design studio.

“It’s really about them, for them to explore,” he said. “This day in time, between social media

and magazines, everything is hitting you in the head with a certain way you have to look. The marketing and the business in general in fashion is kind of cruel, because they don't think people are different; they want you to look a certain way."

Capato encourages his campers to think outside the box and design clothes that make them happy. It is a message that he also tries to pass along to the adults who come through his door.

"We have a big sign on top of the register that says, 'If you are confident, you are beautiful,'" Capato said. "I try to talk to a woman about

GIOVANNI'S FASHION TIPS

1. SHOP INSIDE YOUR CLOSET FIRST.

"A lot of us buy, buy, buy, and don't realize what we already have."

2. GET THE RIGHT UNDERGARMENTS.

"It surprises me every day how many women wear the wrong undergarments."

3. UNDERSTAND YOUR BODY.

"Don't just look for trendy items. Stand in front of the mirror, and understand your body."

how you can feel better about yourself."

Women today juggle many roles, he said, and the pressure to look like a model can drive them away from fashion.

"I don't think it's OK," he said. "So we get together in here, we laugh and have a little wine and talk about it. You don't have to follow what's out there. Love what you have."

Capato said nine out of 10 women who come into his store do not understand their bodies, or do not like what they see in the mirror.

"I put them in front of the mirror all the time and tell them, 'This is you. This is what you have. Love what you have,'" he said.

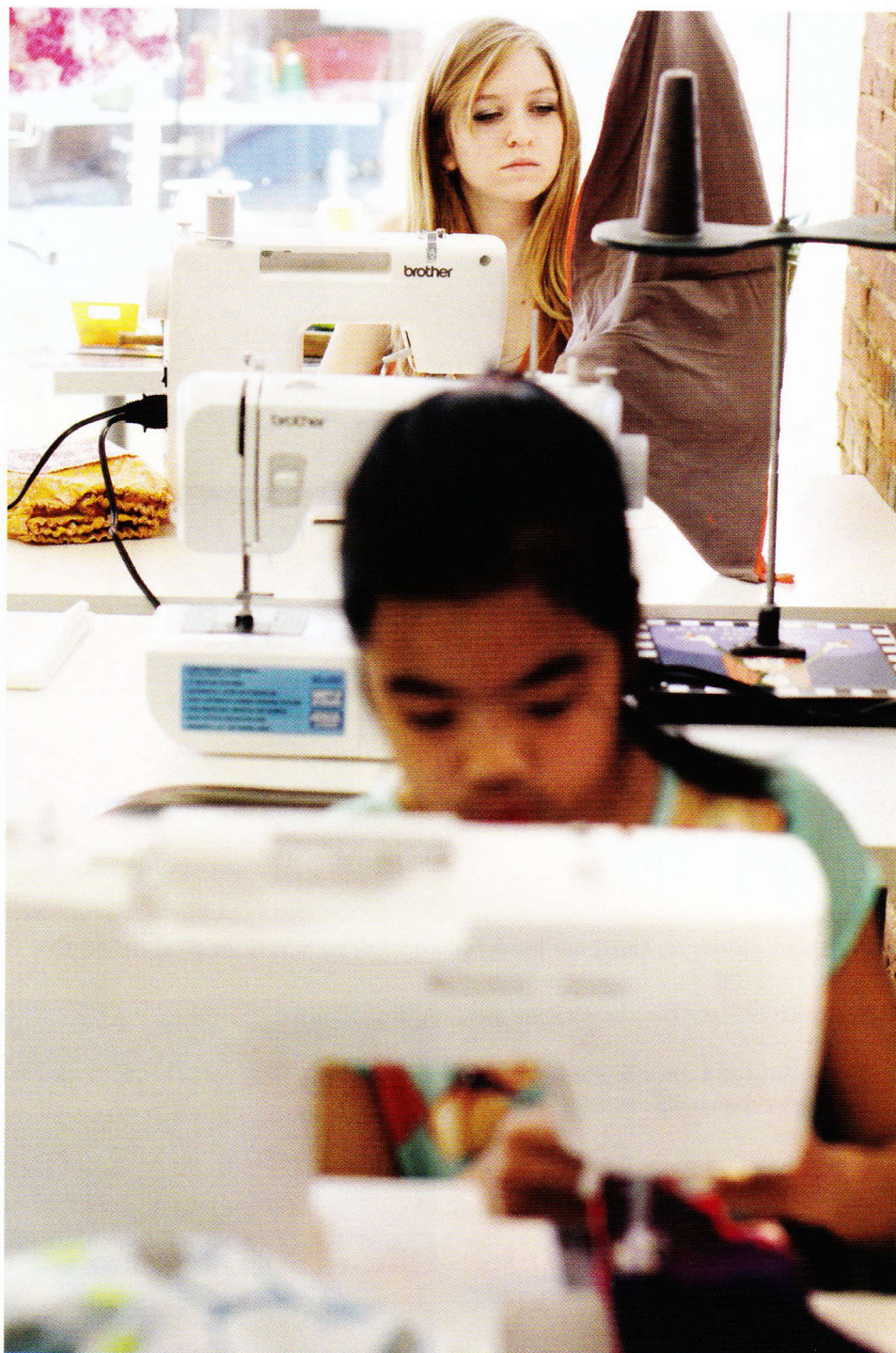
Capato, who grew up on a farm in Brazil, knows a little something about loving what you have.

"My dream was to be a veterinarian," he said. "Fashion was a hobby of mine. At school I was helping my classmates dress up."

After four years at veterinarian school in Rio, he realized the career was not for him; it wasn't his dream after all. He decided to pursue what he realized was his passion, immersing himself into the fashion industry.

"I began dressing up my mom to begin with," he said.

Capato launched his modeling career, through which he met many people. Soon, he was dressing politicians and musicians throughout Brazil.



Campers in Giovanni Capato's classes learn to design clothes that make them happy.

In 1998, he seized an opportunity to come to the United States to model in New York City.

"I came here and the moment I arrived, I said, 'This is me,'" he recalled. "I decided not to go back to Brazil. I thought it would be easy to work in the fashion industry, but I forgot that I didn't speak any English at all. And I had no money."

One of the English phrases he came to understand quickly was the popular fashion-industry phrase "revolving door." He didn't get discouraged. "I decided it wasn't the end for me," he said. "It was the beginning of something new.

I needed to bring my sleeves up, and start to work."

He washed dishes and babysat children while taking English classes at night.

"I did it all because I wanted to stay," he said.

When New York became too expensive, he set out to meet family in Boston.

"I took the bus and I cried for four hours," he said. "You're setting out to something you don't know."

Boston was better. He fell in love with the city. He worked as a concierge at a hotel, then in 2001 was laid off after 9/11. He became a



Aisling Smith's parents are happy that Reach Fashion is helping to keep the art of sewing alive.

U.S. citizen in 2003 and knew he was in the area to stay.

"I knew that now I could do more," he said. "Becoming a citizen is different. A lot of doors open for you."

During a walk through the theater district, he stopped off at Boston Costume.

WHERE'D YOU GET THE NAME?

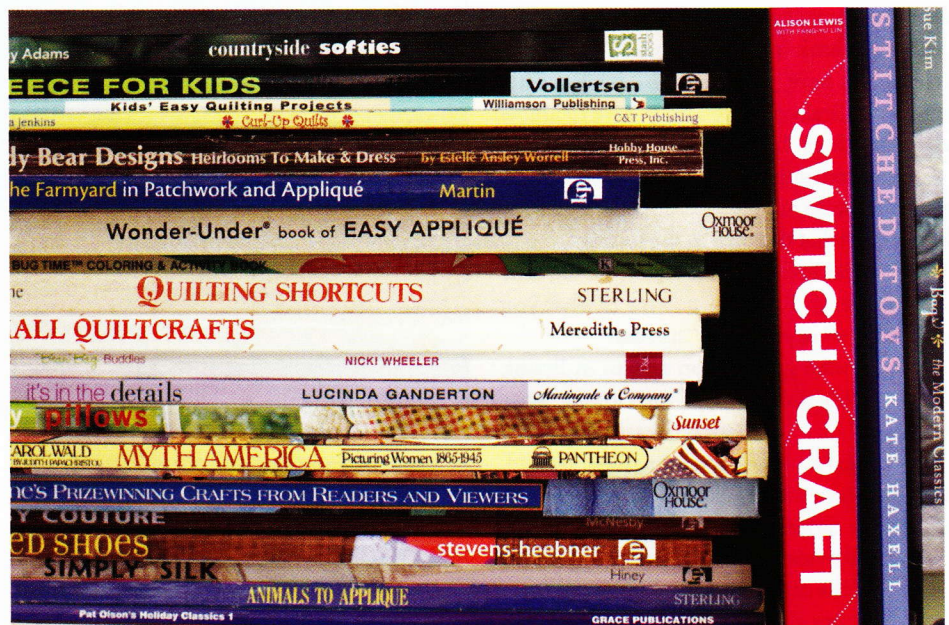
"Where do you want to reach?" Giovanni Capato asked. "People want to be fashionable, and we want them to reach for it."

"They laughed at me, saying, 'You work in the hotel business.' And I said, 'Let me show you what I know,'" he recalled. "That's when I started feeling that I was on the right track."

Capato became the wardrobe person for The Blue Man Group, then purchased his uncle's tailor shop in the South End.

"He gave me the key and he went back to Italy. He left," Capato said.

He was not a tailor. But when a well-known businessman came in to have his pants hemmed, Capato recognized the opportunity.



Many sewing books stack the shelves at Reach Fashion in Haverhill.

"I knew what I had to do," he said. "I went around and I hired the six best tailors Boston had. I was just watching them and I started to do it."

By the time he sold Giovanni's Atelier in

2008, Capato was doing most of the tailoring work himself. He made custom dresses for Miss America contestants, did the wardrobe for a contestant on "The Apprentice," and worked with MTV. When the economy went downhill,



"It's something creative to take an old shirt, cut it up, and make it into something," says Sydney Marshall, pictured.

he sold his shop and became a buyer for a boutique, and later Bloomingdales.

It was around this time that he and his husband, Steven Sciuto, began looking for a house in the suburbs and his real estate broker pushed them toward Haverhill.

"I said, 'I don't want to be in Haverhill. I don't know where Haverhill is,'" he remembered.

The agent convinced them to look there anyway and the home they viewed was everything they were hoping for.

"We realized, we can still go to Boston and have dinner. We love to go to Maine, so now we are in between," he said. "Haverhill has so much to offer."

As the couple grew their family by adopting two sons, Capato began to think about opening a boutique in Haverhill.

"As the sign says in the window, I am proud to be Haverhill," he said. "I really am."

Capato's dedication to the city is clear in the way he runs Reach Fashion. Every week, he hosts four interns from Haverhill High School. The students learn all aspects of running a business, drawing on Capato's extensive background in fashion. When coordinators Lisa Hunt and Victoria Kelley approached him

"If (my fashion students) walk out of here today and go elsewhere to apply for a job, they are not going to doubt whether they will get it or not."

Giovanni Capato

Owner of Reach Fashion, Haverhill

about participating in the internship program, Capato immediately said yes.

"I said to them, 'Why not?'" he recalled. "At the end of the day what do you want? It's nice to make money, it's nice to sell, but it's nice to share what you know."

The four Haverhill High students are interested in various areas of the fashion business, from fabric to retail.

"I challenge them a lot, because I didn't have that when I started here in the U.S. They were born here, they speak the language," Capato said. "I'm giving them the know-how. If they walk out of here today and go elsewhere to

apply for a job, they are not going to doubt whether they will get it or not."

Capato teaches the interns everything from marketing and placing orders, to setting up the store, and customer service.

"Giovanni is a good match for our program, because he has experienced so many different aspects of the fashion industry," Kelley said. "He is able to pass on to students his real-world knowledge."

Because Reach Fashion has the retail outlet and the design center, it is especially valuable to students as they decide what area to pursue within the fashion industry, she said.

"We do get involved," Capato said. "We get involved with The Boys and Girl Club, the YMCA. If they're doing an event, we want to be involved. We really want this city to become the city we all want it to be."

Finished cleaning up after the Fashion Camp runway show, Capato had a few minutes of down time before the afternoon campers arrived for a second show. The next morning, the adult sewing class would be meeting in the Design Studio.

"It doesn't stop," he said. "They keep us busy. They word is getting out."

He paused. "I like busy days." **MVB**