Once upon a time Milwaukee dreamed of couture. This October marks a year since Milwaukee’s fashion scene guilelessly endeavored to make its first strut down the national catwalk by launching a four-day long event titled as predictably as the Anna Wintour naïve might expect. Nonetheless before given the chance to gaffe crown over glass stilettos, or even grace what predictably would’ve been a rather shoddy audience (no big-name celebs donning Marc or Louis in this Brew City), “Milwaukee Fashion Week” was dropped faster than an expanding waistline signed with Ford.

Perhaps more embarrassing than the defamation of Milwaukee’s fashion rep (did one exist in the first?), was that event founder and organizer Hillary Fry called the flop within only twenty-four hours of its Friday night “From Homeland to Hollywood” grand kickoff celebration. Her reasoning: “unfulfilled financial commitments.” Had it been days or better yet weeks before scheduled, the dismissal easily could’ve been shrugged off, argued as a six trying to fill a Jimmy Choo sized for an eight, and unless your name is Cinderella, the shoe better fit.

Instead the confirmed fashion affair had time to build itself a name, elicit hype and anticipation, produce a fully operating website (www.fashionbythelake.com) complete with a detailing of scheduled-by-the-hour happenings (fashionably finishing each evening before the clock struck twelve); tickets had even been sold to eager fashionistas rendering themselves an image of Grant Park high society ($30 per day or $170 for a weekend pass). I’ll admit a sparkle lit my eyes and a brighter smile cast when I read Milwaukee would host its very own fashion week. I also remember feeling surprised and a bit baffled; hence when it cancelled, I sensibly felt neither.

While Milwaukee haute couture didn’t have a Prince charming to save its blunder, the city’s likening towards independent fashion weaves an entirely different tale, complete with its very own, and very different, kind of savior – or rather – originator: the self-proclaimed “Fashion Ninja.”

Allow me to introduce Miss Areka Ikeler. Having spent seven-plus years at the forefront of the city’s independent fashion movement, the Milwaukee native’s cunning eloquence and obvious fashion aesthete leave little wiggle room for doubt. At thirty years old she is the founder and sole-proprietor of FASHION NINJA, INC, a business she launched in 2002 that today includes a school of sewing and design, a boutique and her own design label, all of which share the Fashion Ninja tag.

At the time of my own introduction to Miss Ikeler, her pint-sized frame donned an original pinstriped, billowy blouse, and visibly unseamed then re-stitched blue jeans; a rose-hued newsboy cap disguised her asymmetrically-cut jet-black locks. As she began unraveling her tale, I quickly learned not to be fooled by her subtlety; Ikeler packs more POW! in her ambitious punch than a black-belted class of Mr. Miagi karate kids. Her entrepreneurial venture FASHION NINJA humbly began as a quaint Bay View storefront boutique where Ikeler sold designs from her label; within a year of opening the low drone of Singer’s and “turn, pinch, sew” commands echoed from the store’s rear, a space better suited as a fashion closet than a fashion school. By the end of 2008 enrollment had increased enough to prompt a temporary shut down and
relocation to the old Pritzlaff building space, 315 N. Plankinton Ave., just across the river and off the well-trodden path of the Third Ward’s Water Street.

Fashionable 19th century antiquated wood floors and an open warehouse design lend ambiance to the more recent headquarters, as does its unique accessorizing: a canary yellow vintage couch and large coffee table littered with fashion design paraphernalia welcomes entering guests, and strategically placed mannequins serve as décor as well as tools for design. Hanging on 19-foot-high Cream City brick walls and steel rod racks that skirt the space, Ikeler’s own designs make up the entirety of the boutique’s collection, most of which includes tops and skirts that range in price from mid-20s and up. Ikeler, who studied fashion design for two years at Mount Mary College, describes her designs as urban-chic, shaped from angled cuts and contradicting fabrics. The best-selling “Soviet,” a long underwear thermal fabric that zips up to a flouncy black chiffon bow at the collar carries a loose fitting price tag of $78 (Ikeler will negotiate).

When Ikeler reopened in January 2009 she added yet another component to her fashion movement: pioneering Milwaukee’s Independent Fashion Market. “Over the years I’ve been working with new emerging designers and people interested in sewing, and I found that they needed an outlet so I started Milwaukee’s indie-fashion market,” she said. “It’s intense. It builds a lot of hype and it gives designers a day to showcase their work.” One Saturday each month Ikeler welcomes independent area designers to sell their homemade creations to the public from her space, at no cost to the designer. This month’s Market happens to coincide with the Third Ward Association’s gallery night and day, the “premier art event…for both the art connoisseur and beginning admirer” in which sixty-four venues across the city will exhibit a rainbow spectrum of artworks. Ikeler plans to kick off the event at 9 p.m. on Friday October 16 with “Raw Talent II,” a fashion show showcasing the creations of over a dozen Milwaukee budding designers. Although the show’s title may not carry the same esteem of one such as “Milwaukee Fashion Week,” at least Ikeler’s fashion aspirations have become reality. “Once upon a time” and “the end” not required.