

Kitchener fashion designer's journey began in Nigeria

Satin, lace, chiffon. Fine fabrics fill the design studio where Amaka Obodo creates bridal and evening gowns for her QueenDavis label.

This is where vision becomes reality. Customers arrive with pictures torn from magazines or designs they have seen online. They want something created just for them.

"Someone coming in for custom knows what she wants. They see something that they love, but they don't know how to go about it," Obodo says. "I do two fittings. I make sure it's perfect. Once it's custom, you're not going to have a problem."

This local entrepreneur creates something unique for each woman, to truly reflect her personality. Intricate details include embroidery, sequins, pearls and beadwork.

The Kitchener studio is filled with bridesmaids' dresses, wedding gowns and evening wear in varying stages of completion. Two elegant gowns on mannequins showcase finished works.

Obodo wears jeans with slight embellishment and a crisp white polo shirt. She adds a touch of bling with dangling



Lynn
Haddrall

sparkly earrings.

"My style is very simple. Simple with an edge," she says. "To me, style is comfort. When you wear something, you have to be sure of what you are wearing. I'm very confident in whatever I put on."

"I wear high heels occasionally, but I have to be going somewhere special."

You may not know the QueenDavis brand. Obodo plans to change that. She has done this once already. In 2008 she opened her

Amaka Obodo, owner of QueenDavis, describes her personal style as "simple with an edge." She didn't design this dress; it was an anniversary gift from her husband.

"He knows my style."

PHOTO COURTESY OF AMAKA OBODO

"I loved to calculate. People don't know that there is a lot of calculation in fashion. You have to do a lot of mathematics," she explains. "But the (fashion) interest was from the creative mind. I have always had a creative mind."

Obodo helped university friends who asked for style advice. This led to styling jobs for models at fashion shoots and a desire to open her own store, specializing in bridal and evening wear.

"I didn't want a boutique; I wanted something where I could dress a bride, make her feel good. That's when I opened the store in Nigeria and branded it QueenDavis."

She launched the Nigerian store with brands from China and the United States. Now she only sells her custom designs.

Obodo, now 33, left Nigeria when she was 22, living first in the U.S. where her husband got his MBA, then settling in Kitchener.

She studied fashion at the Toronto Film School, which offers courses ranging from fashion and graphic design to video games. Obodo liked being surrounded by creative people from different fields as she pursued her major in bridal design.

"The school gives us a lot of (support)," she says. "They know a lot of people in the industry. They have a lot of contacts."

Still, this was not an easy process.

"I would go to Toronto from Kitchener every day by bus. That was how determined I was," Obodo recalls. "I wanted this more than anything. It was long and draining."

She left on the 6 a.m. bus and returned on the 7 p.m. bus.

The school keeps in touch with graduates, offering help with contacts for events such as the Toronto Women's Fashion Week. Obodo has participated in several Toronto shows; her first was in 2017. She started with an inspiration board, sketched designs, sourced fabric, created patterns and fitted the models.

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show, it felt so real. It was a proud moment for me because this is what I have been wanting to do for a very long time. My instructors helped me a lot backstage so it wasn't so stressful and the show producers were very organized."

The big moment came at the end when she walked the stage with one of the models. Mingling with other designers was also a highlight.

"Being around like-minded creative people makes me push myself even harder to find other creative ways of achieving goals. Yes, I do get inspired by other designers."

Obodo's passion reached a crossroad when she worked at a major bridal salon in Toronto. That job lasted just three weeks because she had to set aside her own designs and work exclusively for the company. She was not prepared to do that.

She focused instead on a studio in her Kitchener home, with plans to open a bricks-and-mortar shop in 2019.

"I love the energy in downtown Kitchener. That's why I want to move there. People can walk in, see what they like, place an order. That's what I'm working on for next year."

Obodo posts photos of her creations to her website – queendavis.com and her Instagram account – queendavis_womenswear. She revealed her ambitions in a post.

"Creating my own empire by doing what I love. Getting this gown ready for a photo shoot," she wrote, after leaving the Toronto bridal salon to start her own business.

"You can't have your own brand when working with a company, so I thought I better build my own empire, no matter how small," Obodo says. "I'll build mine one day at a time. It doesn't matter how long it takes."

Obodo has attended small-business workshops and knows that a startup comes with challenges. She offers this advice for young entrepreneurs with small businesses:

- Find your passion. Believe in yourself and be passionate about what you do.



TIPS FROM QUEENDAVIS

Amaka Obodo offers these suggestions for choosing a custom gown:

Be specific about colour: "Some people say I just want ivory. There are different kinds of ivories. I like to show you different ivory colours, but you have to tell me which ivory you prefer."

Know what length you would like: "Some people don't like their dresses touching the ground. Some want it floor-length or half-length. I like to know what you want. You have to be specific about that."

Ball gown or mermaid? These are two among endless styles ranging from a simple sheath or mermaid to two-in-one gowns with removable bits. Bring photos to describe your style choice.

Focus on fabric: So much choice. Obodo can offer advice on fabric trends – lace is hot right now – but it is good to come with an idea of what feels best for you. You can purchase your own fabric or Obodo can source it, usually for less because she buys in bulk from her suppliers.

Set a budget: Know how much you want to spend and how the price can be affected by fabric choice and detail work. "If I'm working with lace, it's more expensive. If I'm working with plain satin, it's cheaper. If I'm doing hand work, that is more work, more money."

Have a firm date: Custom work requires time. Don't leave it until the last minute. "When I take an appointment, I ask when is your event? If it's too close, I can't do it. If it's a month, it's OK. Too close is two weeks. I won't do custom in two weeks."

Local designer Amaka Obodo showcases her QueenDavis bridal and evening wear designs at queendavis.com and on Instagram at queendavis_womenswear. Three of her creations can be seen in our Style feature on pages 76, 77 and 79.

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- Know your target market.
- Start small, but think big.
- Get your finances in order. A new business requires a lot of time and sacrifice.
- Start each day with a plan and you will be on your way to success.

Obodo's husband, Ikechukwu Obodo, who is an immigration consultant based in Burlington, helps his wife with the business side of QueenDavis.

The company name combines the couple's birth names. Queen is one of Amaka's given names. She took davis from Macdavis, one of her husband's given names. She laughs when explaining that they each have several middle names. "You got to get it from your grannie, from your parents, everybody names you."

Obodo expects to be busy in 2019 growing her business and celebrating 10 years of marriage. Did she design her own wedding gown?

"I didn't make it. That was many years ago," she says, smiling. "I had input. I went to the store, told them what I wanted, then they got it. I tried it on and that was the only dress that I wanted and I took it."

It was a happy moment and she likes to replicate it for her clients. The best part of her job is the joy she creates for them.

"I think it's the experience with them. There is a feeling that you get when you make somebody happy. She looks good. She is happy. It's her special day. I want to be the person that makes her feel this good on her wedding. I think that's what drove me to do the bridal line. The experience with the brides."

Making a woman feel like a queen for the day. That's a custom experience. ☺