

FASHION FORWARD

Through her Runway of Dreams Foundation, Mindy Scheier is helping to make adaptive clothing mainstream.

Written by **Julie Jacobs**

Photography courtesy of **Mindy Scheier**

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indy Scheier is between meetings and a conference call on a late Thursday afternoon as she leads me to her Runway of Dreams Foundation headquarters, a small office located in her New Jersey home, which is decorated in hues of white. It may be compact, but big things are happening there.

Dressed in flared, fringed jeans and an Alice and Olivia multicolored midi-coat, she moves swiftly through her kitchen, where her 15-year-old son, Oliver, is in the midst of a chef's lesson, chopping food on a cutting board. He is the reason she established her foundation, the first nonprofit organization to champion adaptive clothing for people with disabilities and support the fashion industry in becoming all inclusive.



Scheier with her husband and children

It was in 2013 that Scheier experienced a life-altering epiphany after Oliver, then eight years old, came home from school one day and lamented how he wanted to wear jeans like all his friends. Diagnosed at age four with rigid spine muscular dystrophy, an extremely rare form of MD, he had been restricted to mainly sweatpants and shorts with elastic waists that were easier to put on and fit over his leg braces.

“I think the important part of that was, here I was in the fashion industry...and I needed my eight-year-old to remind me how critically important clothing is to what you are as a person, at any age, at any point in your life,” Scheier remembers. “And basically, what he said to me, which was so eloquent from a little mouth, was that wearing sweatpants every day made him feel like he was dressing disabled.”

“I could have looked at him and said, ‘I’m so sorry, that’s not an option for you,’ but there was no way I was looking at that little face and saying that to him. So I took the opposite approach and said, ‘You bet you’re wearing jeans to school tomorrow.’”

Fighting back tears but armed with fortitude, she toiled well into the night to adapt a pair of his jeans that he normally would not have been able to don himself without assistance. She ripped out

the zipper and button closure and cut up the side seams from the bottoms of the pants legs, replacing them with peel-and-stick Velcro and adding what she describes as “creative rubber banding.” The following morning, she presented him with his new jeans, which he was able to put on independently. That day, he

went to school wearing something other than sweatpants for the first time—a profound moment for both mother and son.

“It was life-changing in the way that I got to experience how a single pair of jeans changed how Oliver felt about himself in a minute, in a second,” Scheier says. “And what that did was open up my eyes to the fact that if he, at eight years old, was struggling with these types of challenges, what in the world did somebody who was an adult, in a wheelchair, who had to dress to go to an interview, or girls going to prom, or all these other milestones, even just everyday life with clothing choices, how were they managing it?”

And thus her research began. She researched “clothing for kids with disabilities” online, but to her surprise, she came up empty, even when her search related to stylish clothing for anyone living with a disability.

“That really was the start of my journey, that I felt that maybe



this was the crossroads of my life and my career. I was meant to take my background and see if I could have a small goal of changing the fashion industry to be inclusive of people with disabilities, because clearly there was a need,” recalls Scheier, whose more than 20 years in fashion include serving as a technical designer for the INC collection at Macy’s and as a stylist at Saks Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, among other roles.

With the support of her family and propelled by her vision, she took the plunge, selling her half of a company she co-founded called Future Fashionistas to devote herself full time to learning more about how to make adaptive clothing more mainstream. She spent the next year visiting schools and hospitals, holding focus groups, conducting surveys, and even engaging with people with disabilities on the street to ask about their clothing quandaries. What she found were common concerns

in three areas: closures such as buttons, zippers, and hooks and eyes; adjustability with sleeve lengths, pants legs, and waistbands; and the way the clothing was put on the body—over the head and through armholes, for example.

When Scheier went to industry leaders to share her discoveries and help designers and manufacturers understand both the need and the possibilities, however, she was politely turned away for fear of monetary risk. She remained undeterred and reevaluated her pathway, looking for a model that would take the financial onus off the companies. Her solution was to establish a nonprofit, which would allow the businesses to become involved and take a tax write-off if this niche market did not succeed. After quickly



educating herself on the rules and regulations for running and funding a 501(c)(3), she launched Runway of Dreams in 2014 and reached back out to those fashion companies with prototypes at the ready. She started hearing back.

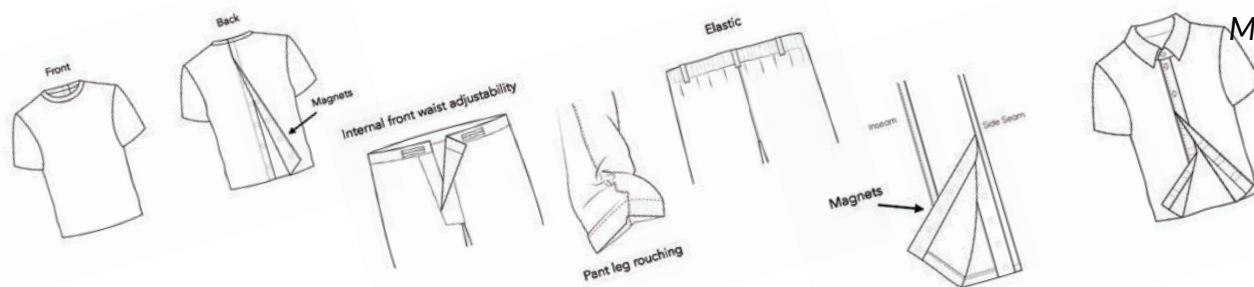
“I knew then that it would happen organically, that I just needed to lead the horse to the water,” Scheier says.

The first brand to partner with Runway of Dreams and develop the first mainstream adaptive clothing line was Tommy Hilfiger in 2016. The line is now called Tommy Adaptive and is available for both children and adults. Scheier and her foundation have since begun working with



Zappos, Target, and Kohl's, and expect to collaborate with more brands this year and into the future.

Steps away from her office are two closets that house adaptive clothing samples of all kinds. She unzips a garment bag to reveal some of the very first ones: a pair of pink Jordache jeans with Velcro in place of a zipper, a shirt with magnets behind buttons as closures instead of buttonholes, and a pair of pants featuring an adjustable hem by way of a button and a loop sewn on the inside. Pulling out a shirt with closures on the back, she explains that some of the adaptive clothing designs are to help people more easily dress others with disabilities, such as parents



and their children and caretakers and their charges or loved ones.

Runway of Dreams, operated today by a small staff and “tons of volunteers all over the country,” has expanded upon its mission in a variety of ways. Certainly the most extensive, says Scheier, is its awareness-building campaigns that send her to speak at conferences, universities, and businesses about the need for adaptive clothing as well as the inclusion of people with disabilities in the fashion industry. Another involves adaptive-clothing donations along with a wardrobe grant program for facilities and individual families that enables them to either tailor existing clothing or purchase new clothing from Runway of Dreams’ brand partners.

Additionally, the foundation supports scholarships both for fashion students interested in designing adaptive clothing and for students with disabilities who want to enter the industry. It collaborates with the American Association of Textile Chemists and Colorists on an international Runway of Dreams design contest, now in its third year. Still another endeavor is Runway of Dreams college clubs, currently at 12 universities nationwide, with 12 more emerging over the next year or so, and through which students help raise awareness by putting on adaptive clothing fashion shows with students with disabilities as the models.

Just last September, in response to many requests from businesses and industries to be connected with people with disabilities, Scheier launched Gamut Management. Runway of Dreams serves as the nonprofit partner of Gamut, which provides the opportunity for adults and children with disabilities to “have a say in how brands market to them, create products for them, and represent them in pop culture,” says Scheier.

The company also represents them for print advertising, runway shows, and TV and film gigs, and has its own “look book.” Wearing clothing from foundation partners’ adaptive lines, the models participate in Runway of Dreams fashion shows as well, including one held during New York’s iconic Fashion Week. Oliver was a model for

these events for quite some time.

“We are really now considered part of the sandbox, so to speak, which is exciting,” remarks Scheier of Runway of Dreams being part of Fashion Week, which, coupled with a gala, functions as the foundation’s primary fundraiser. Other revenue streams include grants and donations.

Aside from her personal experience with her son, Scheier has seen over and over how adaptive clothing can have a powerfully positive impact. She tells the story of a young woman with a prosthetic arm who walked in a Runway of Dreams show in Las Vegas, modeling the Zappos Adaptive line. The show marked the first time the woman felt comfortable enough to shed long sleeves and publicly reveal her prosthetic.

“That meant the world to me, that I was a part of her life that was so enormous,” shares Scheier, noting that the feedback Runway of Dreams has received from clothing recipients and Gamut from its models has been steady and sweet. “There isn’t a day that goes by that we don’t get emails or Facebook messages or LinkedIn notes about how [adaptive clothing and what we are doing have] changed their life.”

As for her own takeaway? She contemplates the question for a bit and then replies, “One idea can change the world. And that sounds, I’m sure, to some people, incredibly overwhelming and huge, but change in the world doesn’t have to be huge and overwhelming. It could be one idea that profoundly affects another human being, and that changes the world.” **LM**

For more information, please visit runwayofdreams.org and gamutmanagement.com.