



Fashion expert has tips for petite women

By Nadine Kam

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A size 2 woman wouldn't seem to share the style difficulties of one who's size 16, but anyone 5-foot-4 or under belongs to the family of petites representing 56 percent of the female population in this country, according to Kim Williams Dahlman.

Now, in a democratic society in which majority is said to rule, it seems wrong that the fashion world still seems to design for a mythical beast who's 5-foot-10 and a size 2, but as long as there is Amazon imagery to slay, Dahlman is guaranteed a job, helping petite women make the most of the garments available to them.

Dahlman, a nationally recognized Petite Fashion Specialist and author of "The Petite Handbook," will be at Macy's next week to share style tips during a Petite Fashion Event. Admission is free but you must RSVP.

Most petite women she's met want advice in looking taller, and Dahlman favors elongating monochromatic looks incorporating variations of a single color, rather than chopping up the body with different color blocks.

"Women have been so hungry for this information and I'd been sharing tips at fashion shows for so many years that they said, 'Why don't you write it down?'"

Her book is available for \$10.95 (plus \$2.25 shipping) online at www.thepetitehandbook.com, and copies will be available at the Macy's event.

While manufacturers and clothing buyers have a long way to go in understanding and addressing the plight of the petite woman, gains have been made in the 20 years that Dahlman's been a petite advocate. She organized some of the first petite fashion shows in New York, works on educating buyers and manufacturers, and travels the nation to speak to petite women.

Prior to starting her consulting business, Fashion Marketing Services, Dahlman worked as a petite sportswear buyer for Allied Department Stores, corporate petite buyer for Belk Stores Services and director of sales for Susan Bristol Petites.

At 5-foot-4 she tops the scale for petites but suffered through the Dark Ages of petite dressing, when finding appropriate adult attire was difficult.

"Clothes were ruffly and girly, with little ribbons or ditzy prints," she said. "Today, in better petite departments, and I consider Macy's to be one, you'll find a lot more sophistication and all the trends."

'Petite' defined

"Petite" refers to an all-over proportioning of the body from head to toe, not side to side. A petite customer can have the same bust and hip measurement as a "misses" size customer, but misses clothing won't fit properly because petite women have a shorter body frame.

Most high-profile manufacturers have a petite line, she said, but it's another challenge to get department store buyers to consider bringing them in, when floor space is valuable.

"They're still sending women to the juniors department, and the look they get is not right; it's too young."

Cost is a factor for retailers who prefer the safety zone of the vast middle territory encompassing women who wear sizes 6 to 12, rather than the perceived few fitting in above or below that range.

"I have good rapport with a lot of stores, but there's a constant changing of the guard," Dahlman said.

"Buyers change frequently so I always feel I'm taking one step forward and 10 steps backward. Just when you meet one who understands, along comes another one who just doesn't get it."

"They may buy only one size 2 and one size 16, and when it's gone, that's it," said Dahlman. She suggests making friends with a sales associate who can keep an eye out for new arrivals that could suit your needs.

But Dahlman also points out that petite sales comprise \$9 billion in this country annually, and Banana Republic's introduction of petites online in 2001, followed by a petites department in its stores, "was huge progress" in light of the follow-the-herd mentality of the retail world.

"The biggest (petite) boom was in the 1980s," Dahlman said. "I started with petites and never looked back, but there's still so much room for growth."