

What's Hot

wednesday.6.17

COMEDY

James Gregory

7:30 p.m. McGlohan Theatre, 345 N. College St. \$25-\$75. 704-372-1000; www.carolinatix.org.

The veteran comic takes the Spirit Square stage to deliver "rib-tickling reflections on life from the front porch."

thursday.6.18

MUSIC

Keith Urban

7:30 p.m. Time Warner Cable Arena, 333 E. Trade St. \$20-\$77. 800-745-3000; www.time.warnercablearena.com.

The Grammy Award-winning country star brings his "Escape Together World Tour" to uptown, with red-hot opener Sugarland in tow.

friday.6.19

EXPO

Heroes Convention

11 a.m.-7 p.m. (also 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Sunday). Charlotte Convention Center, 501 S. College St. \$15 at the door; three-day pass for \$30. 704-375-7462; www.heroesonline.com.

Meet the forces behind some of today's hottest comics, shop and attend workshops at one of the country's oldest comics conventions.

FESTIVAL

NoDa School of Arts

4-10 p.m. 36th and North Davidson streets (behind Neighborhood Theatre). \$20 adults; \$5 ages 5-17; free under 5. 704-281-0906; www.noda.schoolofarts.org.

Bring blankets and chairs and enjoy live music and entertainment. \$20 tickets include barbecue, sides, plus two drinks (soda or beer).



COREYSMITH.COM PHOTO

MUSIC

Corey Smith

8 p.m. The Fillmore Charlotte, 820 Hamilton St. \$17-\$22. 704-549-5555; www.livenation.com.

The energetic folk-rocker with the soulful Southern voice plays the first show at Charlotte's new live-music club.

saturday.6.20

MUSIC

Bad Company and The Doobie Brothers

7:30 p.m. Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre, 707 Pavilion Blvd. \$31-\$61. 704-549-5555; www.livenation.com.

The two '70s-era bands unite for a nostalgia show that will have classic-rock fans drinking up both "Holy Water" and "Black Water."

sunday.6.21

EXPO

Summer Bridal Show

1-4 p.m. Hilton Charlotte University Place, 8629 J.M. Keynes Drive. www.charlottebridalshow.com.

Talk to wedding professionals about fashions, photography, catering, flowers and more. Prizes will be awarded throughout the event.



PHOTOS BY EMILE WAMSTEKER - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

"Brandon's got that (Carolina) friendliness and smarts and talent," designer Betsey Johnson says of Brandon Aldridge. "You'd think that everyone's got that, but they don't." The two share a laugh while setting up her studio for New York Fashion Week in February.

ALDRIDGE

■ from IE

The road to Aldridge's childhood home in Morganton wends through rolling hills, past ramshackle barns and yards dotted with rusted-out cars and trucks amid the tall grass. Just when you've think you've made a wrong turn, a quaint, quiet subdivision of modest homes appears.

This is where his creativity was nurtured. His parents, Ann and Wade Aldridge, built the ranch-style home in 1973, and it's where they raised Brandon, 36, and his brother, Richard, 39.

Wade, 73, now retired, was a plumber, but also a photo buff who once had work featured in Southern Living magazine. Ann, 64, worked as an educator at the N.C. School for the Deaf, and is now a freelance sign language interpreter.

As a kid, Brandon was always drawing and sketching, especially clothing ensembles and models, his brother said.

"We always told (Brandon), 'If you're just willing to work hard enough, things will happen for talented people,'" his mother said. "He was born with a lot of talent, and he has to use that."

Brandon couldn't decide what he wanted to do after graduating in 1990 from Freedom High School in Morganton, 75 miles northwest of Charlotte.

The town has changed some over the years, but it's confident and comfortable in its little-town groove. You can get Diane Von Furstenberg and Rock & Republic at Libba's on Sterling Street downtown, but you can be sure that folks behind the counter can pick out a non-native at first glance.

Lessons at a textile mill

The colleges Aldridge attended off and on over the next 11 years were as varied as the subjects he studied - architecture and fine art at Western Piedmont Community College, broadcast journalism at Appalachian State University.

After his first of two enrollments at ASU, he said, "I got into the classes there, and realized this is not really what I wanted to do. But I still didn't know what I wanted to do."

So he dropped out and moved back into his parents' home. If he wasn't in school, he was going to work, they said. He took the job at Doblin.

There, Aldridge worked as a filling handler, dragging carts from one end of the expansive mill to the other, pulling materials to fill 10 orders at a time.

There were 150 looms weaving upholstery fabric that needed to be fed constantly, he said. "It was manual labor. It was hard." Besides dropping 60 pounds while working there, Aldridge picked up practical experience.

He was getting hands-on lessons in the basic building blocks of fashion - the fabric.

Aldridge's knowledge of technicalities such as warp (the tight lengthwise core of a fabric) and weft ("filler" thread that is woven among the warp, creating a design) would serve him well in the next chapter of his life.

"That wasn't part of my plan at the time," he said. "It was just a job. But everything leads to something else."

After working at the mill for a year and a half, he moved to Raleigh with intentions of enrolling at UNC Chapel Hill. But he got cold feet.

While working at J Crew at Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh, Aldridge realized what his parents had been saying all along: It's harder to make a living without a college degree.

"I was the stock room supervisor, and I was working on the sales floor, trying to get into visual merchandising," he said. "I remembering thinking



From his crowded desk at the Betsey Johnson studio, Aldridge oversaw the design and completion of up to 70 items a month.

this is kind of fun, this is interesting, I'm enjoying it... but there was no room for advancement because I didn't have a degree."

People around Aldridge saw the potential he had yet to recognize in himself. His colleagues at the mill razzed him for not finishing school, and so did friends, especially Donna Presnell. She offered him a place to stay in Boone - rent-free - if he would just go back to school.

"A light went off in my head. I had done fashion sketching my entire life," Aldridge said. "It never clicked. I was like, 'Oh my God, this is it!'"

In 1997, Aldridge went back to Appalachian.

To pay for tuition, he worked at Shops on the Parkway, an outlet mall in nearby Blowing Rock, eventually becoming manager of the Gap.

The promise of advancement and making a career out of the Gap sounded almost too good to be true to Aldridge, who, after graduating in 2001, transferred with the company to a store in Manhattan.

"Since I was 14 years old and on a school trip to New York from Morganton, (moving to) New York was my main goal in life," he said. "It took me 15 years, but I finally made it."

He landed in a Gap at 54th and Madison avenues in Manhattan, and made his design intentions clear to Gap managers. Just help us out and manage this store, they said, and something will happen.

Aldridge was transferred to a store near the South Street Seaport. His enthusiasm for big-city retail was on the wane.

"The store reeked of fish," he said. "The merchandise reeked too."

"Gangs of people would come in, open up trash bags and rake entire displays into them. You know the leather coats that were plugged into the alarm system? People would just come in and rip the plugs out and walk out with the coats."

"They'd get in fistfights with secu-

ity. I was miserable. It was beyond crazy."

After a particularly bad day, he called a friend who had just moved to New York to intern for Betsey Johnson. She told him it was amazing.

"I wasn't getting anywhere doing what I was doing," he said. "I had no design experience at that point. I started thinking... I got a big tax refund that year, and could live off it for two months."

Half-joking, Aldridge asked if Johnson needed more interns. Yes, the friend said, two had quit. He passed along his résumé, and the next day, he was hired for an unpaid, two-month stint at the legendary design house.

The two months were exciting and educational, Aldridge said. But as the time ticked down, so did his bank balance.

With only one week left, he had \$40 in his checking account. He was offered a paid position as a design assistant.

Of course, he took it. "But the pay was half of what I had been making at the Gap."

A job with Betsey Johnson

He could hardly believe his good luck. Being hired off your first internship just doesn't happen in fashion. The industry puts a lot of emphasis on paying dues. Résumés of world-famous designers are filled with years in shadows.

While students who attend highly regarded design schools like Parsons or Fashion Institute of Technology may catch a break, opportunities for grads from a public college in the N.C. mountains are more rare.

Aldridge is proud of the training he received at Appalachian. He credits his teachers and classes in the clothing and textiles program with his fine-tuned technical skills.

Aldridge quickly found himself shouldering lots of responsibilities at Betsey Johnson.

He was put in charge of designing

Brandon Aldridge

Influences: John Galliano. "The stuff he does for Christian Dior - anybody who can come with something that is that over the top and creative is ultra-talented."

Last book read: "I can't even remember. I pick an author and read everything they have. I read all the Ann Rice books, then got on John Grisham."

Favorite way to relax: A glass of red wine.

Sweet or unsweet tea: "I don't drink either. I try not to eat sugar."

the evening collection - "All the fun dresses," he said - moving fast enough to put 70 new styles in stores per month.

The hours were long, deadlines were short and there's no room for error in the fashion capital of the world.

"Brandon's got that (Carolina) friendliness and smarts and talent," designer Johnson said while setting up her studio for Fashion Week in February. "You'd think that everyone's got that, but they don't."

His Southern heritage is still very much a part of who he is. He's gracious and reserved, but friendly and quick with a smile. Every now and then, the slightest hint of a Southern accent slips out. "I'm from North Carolina: What you see is what you get. I'm not trying to be anything other than me."

He's helped students from his Morganton high school and Appalachian land internships at Betsey Johnson. "Everybody deserves a chance," he said.

Time to move on

But after six years at Betsey Johnson, Aldridge decided in March it was time to move on.

The company was bought by a private equity hedge fund in 2007. Plus, he worried he was being stitched into a frilly-prom-dress corner.

"In this industry, when you work for a company for such a long time, you tend to get pigeonholed," he said.

For Brandon, the answer was to go his own way, something he had done plenty of times before. He's focusing on working the Asian manufacturing connections he established during his work at Betsey Johnson and working on freelance design.

His friends couldn't believe he was walking away from a job in this economy, but Aldridge and partner of seven years, Andrew Gibson, made the decision together.

"Economy or not, this was the right decision for me," Aldridge said.

And, the economy is working in his favor. It's easier to land contract work with bigger design houses right now, he said.

"My dream, of course, is to have (my) own line at some point in time, and one of the things I'm currently working on could potentially turn into that," he said.

Coming from someone who can say they worked in a textile mill and designed a dress worn by Amy Winehouse, it doesn't sound that far-fetched.

Rachel Sutherland: 704-358-5440; rsutherland@charlotteobserver.com

Story behind the story



One of Brandon's teachers from Freedom High School contacted me and said I needed to meet him the next time I was in New York. I took her advice and was captivated by his personal journey and ability to stay true to himself while getting ahead in fashion. — RACHEL SUTHERLAND



Every available inch of space at the Betsey Johnson studio is packed with work from her 30 years in the business. Intern Jess LaRock, 22, sews tags into garments that were to be part of Johnson's Fashion Week presentation.