

# Perfect Fit

Inspired by her granddaughter, Karen Bowersox created a clothing line for those with Down syndrome. / BY AMBER MATHESON /

**Y**ou may take your femur bone for granted. Maybe you're not even sure what part of your body it belongs to. But for a toddler with Down syndrome, that thigh bone is often shorter. It's one of the many physical differences people with the chromosomal anomaly face, and when you're a baby just starting to walk, it's yet another challenge to overcome.

Karen Bowersox used to be oblivious to the real differences between the general public and people with Down syndrome. "I was like everyone else who doesn't understand the problems of a person with Down syndrome," she says. "They have a completely different body shape."

Then her granddaughter Maggie came along. The little girl tripped over rolled-up pants and struggled to be active in clothes that simply didn't fit the typical Down syndrome body type: short-ened bones, less prominent shoulders, larger necks and stomachs. Rolling up her tiny pants didn't fix the problem. So at an age when most grandparents are looking forward to retirement, the Mentor resident and a lifelong entrepreneur started Downs Designs.

"Everything that I've done in my life has literally led me to this point," says the 62-year-old. From starting a house-cleaning operation to her years as a manager of her husband's medical practice, Bowersox had gained a fearlessness that enabled her to jump into the world of fashion — a world she knew nothing about.

One and a half years, two designers and eight models later, Bowersox and her team have created jeans and shirts for adults with Down syndrome and are focusing on a children's line of simple clothes due out this summer. The clothes were tailored on people with Down syndrome, so the hems and seams hit in all the right places, from the neckline to the shoulders to the knees and inseams. Like her adult line, the children's line is starting out with simple clothes: jeans and cotton-polyester-blend T-shirts.



» Karen Bowersox's clothing line will include jeans and T-shirts.

But pajamas, blouses, skirts and even cool graphic tees are in the works. "We're inventing something that never existed," Bowersox says. "It's just the beginning."

Because her clothing is still in the process of being sewn and shipped, Bowersox's prices are still in the works. But, she says, expect the price tags to be competitive; kids' jeans will top out under \$20, for example.

Although it's been hard to get financing for her company, she's focused on a single, powerful fact: 5.8 million people worldwide have Down syndrome, and they could all use clothing that fits. "It's so necessary," she says. "By the time my granddaughter cares what she wears, she will have an entire wardrobe. And she will have one less challenge in her life."

➔ MORE INFO [downsdesigns.com](http://downsdesigns.com)

## ROLL MODELS



**THE CLEVELAND FIRESTARTERS** are an accepting bunch. That was Kellie Weenink's vision when she started the junior roller derby team for 7- to 17-year-old girls. "You don't have to fit the mainstream mold of being previously athletic," says Weenink, former president of the Burning River Roller Girls. "You don't have to be a cheerleader or a bookworm." Weenink, who is a team coach along with Victoria Stanbridge, says roller derby has transformed the 30 girls who participate. "The whole self-esteem in a lot of the girls has increased," she says. Here's three reasons to check out their public debut, *Cordogs & Carnage*, on July 30 at the Summit County Fairgrounds. // KELLY PETRYSYN

**IT'S AN OHIO FIRST.** The Firestarters are the first and only junior team in Ohio, so up until this first home match, they've had to travel to compete.

**EVERYONE PARTICIPATES.** No matter the age, all girls face one another in bouts. "People are freaking out because we got an 8-year-old falling down on concrete," Weenink says. She assures that although some Firestarters are very young, they are tough.

**THEY GO ALL OUT.** "As long as it's legal, the impact of the hit is up to you," Weenink says. Her 13-year-old daughter, Jenna, has fallen her fair share of times but has been on the other side, too. "I don't like falling, but I like to hit people," Jenna says.

➔ MORE INFO [clevelandfirestarters.com](http://clevelandfirestarters.com)