CITIZEN
— of the —
WORLD
BY SHAYNE FUJII ’89

FASHION DESIGNER AND EDUCATOR DAVID LEUNG ON LIVING A LIFE WITH PURPOSE

Mid-Pacific Alumnus

David Leung ’75 knows the true meaning of living life to its fullest. Becoming a “citizen of the world” while never hesitating to explore life’s beauties and challenges, Leung has always stayed true to himself, following his passions and marching to the beat of his own drum.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, he learned very quickly the pressures and expectations that come with being the eldest son of a Chinese family. Leung’s parents were very nurturing and supportive and instilled strong family values. “Study hard, set good examples, honor the family name – there was a lot of pressure on me to live up to these strong Chinese traditions,” he says. “Hong Kong was a British Colony at the time and almost every Asian family wanted their son to be either a doctor, lawyer or a business man.” Despite these expectations, Leung always dreamed of being a musician or an artist as a youngster. He would enroll in music and art lessons including the piano, violin and organ, drawing, painting as well as school orchestra and choir. These childhood dreams would never come to fruition as his father would lecture him on the difficulties of getting a job with an art or music degree after college.

There were only two universities in Hong Kong at the time. It was extremely difficult and competitive to get in so many parents would send their children abroad to study. “I always had this fantasy to escape Hong Kong, escape from the pressure, the strict tradition, the feeling of being trapped. I wanted to see the world,” says Leung. In 1973, he made the big move to Hawaii and completed his junior and senior years of high school at Mid-Pacific.

“The cultural and social experience at the school was amazing! Coming from a different culture, I learned how to dream big. It was such a liberating feeling. I really opened up to new things and learned about different cultures as Mid-Pacific had an exciting melting pot of students not only from Hawaii and the mainland USA, but also from different countries around the world.” As for academics, Leung believes Mid-Pacific provided him with the training ground for the game of life. “I feel Mid-Pacific really opened the minds of every young soul and gave me a
well-rounded preparation of growing up. Dorm life there was an amazing experience. I learned how to be independent and disciplined," he says. Learning how to live in a community, to collaborate and bond with his fellow students was an experience he will never forget. "We all developed a special bond, a brotherhood support system that has lasted a lifetime."

He speaks fondly of two influential figures from Mid-Pacific – English teacher, Maxine Hong Kingston and Counselor, Dorothy Crowell. "Ms. Hong taught us how to be our own true self and how to tell our own life stories. As a Chinese-American, she had an amazing command of the English language and literature. She had such a big influence on me," says Leung. After teaching at Mid-Pacific, Hong Kingston went on to become a renowned author and professor. She is known for writing several award-winning novels about the experiences of Chinese-Americans. Leung goes on to say, "Of course, who can forget Aunty Dottie (Dorothy Crowell). She was the mother of the campus, always making sure we were fine, especially us foreign students. She had the biggest smile and gave the warmest hugs!"

After graduating from Mid-Pacific in 1975, Leung earned a bachelor's degree at the University of Hawaii in Fashion Design and Merchandising. He then moved to New York City and earned an Associate of Applied Science degree in fashion design at the Fashion Institute of Technology. After graduating and working in New York for a few years, he made a big decision. "I decided to move to Italy to expand my creativity and fulfill my passion to see more," says Leung. "I simply packed two suitcases and made the move without knowing anyone there!"

It was in Europe where he would get his first big break. Leung landed a job at Versace, a world famous Italian luxury fashion design company in Milan, Italy. Versace is still one of top three fashion design companies in the world. "I dropped off my portfolio at the office and I remember feeling really intimidated and admiring the interiors of the Versace Palazzo," he says. "Mr. Gianni Versace (founder of the company) came out to greet me and apparently liked my designs and offered me a job that day!" Leung became the very first Chinese designer to work in Italy. "Surprisingly I never wanted to work for Versace because they had a different design philosophy. They had a more ‘rock and roll’, ‘movie star’ style while my design style was totally the opposite – more the classical style. This turned out to be the most amazing, fulfilling experience as it opened my mind to greater heights," shares Leung. One day Gianni Versace asked Leung to go downstairs with him at the company's Italian Palazzo and showed him the front door knob that was shaped like a Medusa head. He asked Leung to create a design inspired by the ornate door knob. The result is a logo that is synonymous with Versace and featured on underwear, sunglasses, bags, shoes and belts. Leung's design is still being used on Versace branded apparel today.

During his time at Versace, Leung and the Versace design team's work was worn by celebrities including Michael Jackson, Sting, Julie Andrews and Elton John. After these amazing accomplishments, Leung felt the need to venture out and explore. "After four years with the company, I realized I didn't want to be restricted in a studio from 9 to 5 designing all my life. I felt it was important to be able to tell my story, something I learned from Maxine Hong Kingston at Mid-Pacific. Everyone knows how to make an omelette. The key is to use your own special spices to make your own special omelette when it comes to life experiences," says Leung. In 1992, Leung left Versace and continued his life’s adventure exploring and working with other fashion houses in Italy and New York. He has designed for companies including Sonia Bogner, Magaschoni, Zoran and Natori.

In 2006, Leung made another bold move and decided to go back to school to get his master's degree in Visual Culture, and pursue costume and textile studies at New York University. He went from working in fashion to exploring the academic side. "I literally became a struggling grad student. People would wonder all the time why I was doing this," says Leung. "I had this strong urge to pamper my passion in fashion and to learn more about the history of clothing, textile, and to train to be a better designer and perhaps a design critic and teach. I was so passionate about this at the time to find a new life purpose."

After getting his master's degree in 2008, Leung went on to teach at a number of prestigious design schools in New York including Parson's School of Design, one of the top design schools in the world.

Today, he remains on the academic side of the fashion industry and continues his work in New York as a professor and lecturer at Parsons School of Design, Parsons Space Continuing Education, Fashion Institute of Technology and Kent State University Fashion School. In 2015, Leung began offering fashion consulting services to different companies, and providing professional coaching for new designers. He also started the online fashion journal, Asianatorial. The journal showcases Asian creativities and promotes fashion designers, artists, models and photographers. The journal's ultimate goal is to bring awareness of the culture exchange of fashion and beauty to the contemporary world.

"I feel my life is really coming to a full circle," says Leung. He is now establishing a home in New York and no longer feels the need to 'escape' to different adventures. "I feel so fortunate to have been able to learn, absorb and appreciate European artistic aesthetics and lifestyles while I lived in Europe and traveled around the globe. Now more than ever I am appreciating and nurturing my Asian heritage." Leung does not see himself as just an Asian man or an Asian designer any more. He sees himself as a "citizen of the world."