



WHAT NOT TO WEAR

AND OTHER ADVICE FROM AN IMAGE CONSULTANT.

Words **Raina Delisle** Photography **Cory Dawson**

For many of us, the New Year brings resolutions for self-improvement: lose weight, climb the corporate ladder, expand that social circle. Achieving these goals inevitably leads to a more positive self-image. But if you *start* with a good self-image, regardless of your jean size or job title, success may come more easily. It's the old chicken or egg argument, and White Rock's only certified image consultant, Mihaela Ciocan, believes she's cracked the code.

Like most of Mihaela's clients, Kari Stevenson is ready for a change. She has entered her forties, and her teenage kids are now self-sufficient, street savvy and sans stress. "I'm coming up for air now," she says. "I have the luxury of starting to think about myself again." Sitting in a coffee shop, sipping a mint tea before her first meeting with Mihaela, she talks excitedly about what she hopes to get out of her introductory session, which will focus on developing her personal style at work and play.

"I have my own little body rules about what looks good, but I'm looking for some ideas," says the curvaceous five-foot-10 redhead. Kari wants to learn to accessorize and find a good middle ground between workwear and sporty attire, while still dressing age and body-type appropriate. "I love animal patterns, but I had to give them up when I got to a certain age. I don't want to look like a cougar," she says with a laugh. "Now I stick to uniform colours." She uses her outfit as an example: a bell-sleeved cream blouse with a ruffle down the front, a black, backless vest and flared black pants.

Kari's unionized, male-dominated workplace, where she develops simulation exercises for training air-traffic controllers, doesn't inspire her inner fashionista. In fact, whenever she gets a little too dressy, it's always the same question: "Going for a job interview?" And since the outdoorsy Ocean Park resident spends most of her spare time on the tennis court and the yoga mat and jogging, not strutting, around town, her casual attire is largely built around Lycra and cotton. After collecting some extra outfits from her car for expert analysis, Kari opens the door of Mihaela's boutique, Alanna Mathis, where the style guru is preparing for her pupil.

Mihaela, who moved to Canada from Romania in 2003, owns and operates her own consulting business, as well as one of the area's most stylish boutiques. ImagePro Image Consulting offers a range of services, including communication and etiquette training, wardrobe auditing, body and colour analysis, and styling. While Mihaela often goes shopping with clients and recommends boutiques to visit, she thought having her own shop full of the latest fashions would be a major bonus. So, in June 2006, two years after launching ImagePro, she opened Alanna Mathis. There, she carries hard-to-find European lines and high-end Canadian names. "You

can be fashionable no matter what situation you are in, no matter how challenged you think you are when it comes to your body," Mihaela says. "Everyone has to work with what they have, and everyone can look better."

And now it's Kari's turn. Attractive and authoritative, Mihaela commands the floor like that passionate university professor you'll always remember. Kari takes a seat on one of the black leather chairs, but this is no lecture. "Up, up. Come to the mirror," Mihaela says, like a mother coaxing a child. "Now tell me what you see." A former journalism and fashion student, Mihaela looks expertly put together in a flowing, fuchsia skirt, a long string of matching beads around her neck, and a blazer with cute detailing on top. She takes a model stance – one pointy shoe out, hands on hips, chin down – and a discerning look crosses her pretty face. "What do you like about your body? What are your challenges?" she prompts. Kari lists her height, her muscular thighs and her colouring as her unique style considerations. With the ease of a seasoned tailor, Mihaela tugs and tucks Kari's clothes, showing her how they look better fitted. "Your style is very classic," she quickly assesses. Then, like an artist dipping into different colours on her palette, Mihaela cruises around the shop and pulls out pieces she'd like to see on Kari. "You look good in jewel tones," she tells her fair-skinned client, who takes it all in, nodding in agreement.

Kari leaves the boutique with plenty of inspiration, but also mixed emotions. "She really does seem to know what she's talking about," Kari says. "But, it's funny, I went in feeling pretty good, and when I left, I felt taken down a couple of pegs." True enough, having your style analyzed is a bit like an injection: it'll pinch a little, but eventually, you'll feel better.

"It's never easy to ask for help, especially with something as personal as style," Mihaela acknowledges. "But it's nothing to be embarrassed about. I think people are becoming more and more comfortable with the idea that they can't do everything on their own." A member of the Association of Image Consultants International, Mihaela says image consulting, like personal training, will move from being a luxury service to something more common. Already her clients include everyone from politicians and professionals to seniors and stay-at-home moms – she even did a wardrobe audit for a 94-year-old woman. "It's not a matter of age, it's all about attitude," she says. "It's about how you want to feel about yourself and how you live your life." **1b**

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