

Saks Fifth Avenue in Chevy Chase created a display expressly for Diane von Furstenberg's Glam Rock runway presentation.

a vital voice

DESIGN ICON DIANE VON FURSTENBERG LENDS SUPPORT TO VITAL VOICES GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP, EMPOWERING WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD. BY LESLIE QUANDER WOOLDRIDGE

As she strides onstage at the Vital Voices Global Leadership Awards, the red soles of Diane von Furstenberg's Louboutins peek out with each step, and her black dress—DVF, of course—glitters under the lights of the Kennedy Center's Opera House. She embodies pulled-together polish, even with her left arm trussed by a custom chain-print sling. "Excuse the appearance... this is a ski adventure," she murmurs, referring to a recent spill on the slopes that resulted in a broken shoulder.

After her brief explanation, the legendary fashion designer and philanthropist deflects attention away from herself, because she has come to Washington to recognize five women (and three men) who have worked to strengthen democracy and expand economic opportunity across the world. She is also here to introduce the group's founder, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who she embraces before exiting the stage.

As a Vital Voices board member, von Furstenberg works closely with the DC-based organization, which invests in women who are social entrepreneurs, political representatives, businesswomen, and human rights defenders; the group has trained and mentored more than 14,000 women from more than 140 countries since 1997. This year's inspiring awardees include Somalia's Dr. Hawa Abdi, a doctor who has run a hospital and camp for thousands of refugees throughout the country's 22-year civil war.

A few days after the poignant awards ceremony, while von Furstenberg prepares for a runway show at Saks Fifth Avenue in Chevy Chase, she reflects on Abdi and other women who bravely take on projects that could bring them harm. "What I like so much is that they are so strong, and they have the strength to survive, the courage to fight, and then the leadership to inspire," she says. "They humble you."

For her part, von Furstenberg remains modest about her venerable career and her place in fashion's high court. Though she has served four terms as president of the esteemed Council of Fashion Designers of America since 2006, a post she'll hold until at least 2014, the 66-year-old shrugs off the plum position as just another day at the office. ("I thought it would be two years, and I'm still there," she quips.) And, as she did at the Vital Voices gala, the designer often eschews the spotlight: While drawing a standing ovation from notable attendees at the fall presentation of her Glam Rock collection in Chevy Chase, she skipped a speech and a victory lap on the runway, and instead simply stood and waved to those gathered.

Born in Brussels, von Furstenberg has found immense success in the fashion world—though her career has seen ups and downs. She arrived in



PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BROWN/MILINATON (VON FURSTENBERG)



PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BROWN/MILINATON (PHOTOGRAPHY (RUNWAY, DVF); GETTY IMAGES (ABDI))

ABOVE: Diane von Furstenberg talks with Saks Fifth Avenue President Ronald L. Frasch. RIGHT: Dr. Hawa Abdi accepts an award from Vital Voices for her work with Somali refugees.



New York in 1969 after marrying her first husband, Prince Egon von Furstenberg, and sold millions of her iconic wrap dress by 1976. After separating from Egon in the '70s, she sold off her business in the '80s. In the '90s she revived her brand, and today she heads a design house that boasts a global distribution network across more than 55 countries and 1,500 points of sale worldwide—all while continuing a robust schedule of philanthropic activities. "It's not like she's not a busy woman. What she's done... is really extraordinary," notes Saks Fifth Avenue President and Chief Merchandising Officer Ronald L. Frasch, who has known the designer for more than three decades. (Von Furstenberg also holds his company dear: "Saks believed in me when I was a very young girl, and we go back a very long time, so when they invited me to do this, I was happy to," she says of her Chevy Chase show.)

In addition to her local appearances and work with Vital Voices, von Furstenberg and her husband, media mogul Barry Diller, created the The Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation, a private entity that has committed more than \$30 million in grants to a variety of nonprofit institutions

BELOW: Diane von Furstenberg runway presentation took place at Saks Fifth Avenue in Chevy Chase.



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—DIANE VON FURSTENBERG

since its inception in 1999, including the DC College Access Program, Vital Voices, and the Central Park Conservancy. "We each have [a] specialty, and my specialty in our family foundation is really women," she explains, recalling that her mother, a Nazi concentration camp survivor, inspired her. "My mother was a survivor, and she taught me that fear was not an option," the designer reveals. "She would not tolerate me [being] afraid or not [being] strong."

Fittingly, the designer appreciates fearlessness in others, and so she sponsors The DVF Awards, which recognized several honorees this spring, including Tina Frundt, founder of Courtney's House in DC. "She has a center... and rescues people who have been [victims of] human trafficking, because she was one herself," von Furstenberg says of the Frundt.

The designer's personal history and lauded legacy complement her ongoing philanthropic work. "It's been a wonderful adventure because, through fashion, I became the woman I wanted to be. I found my independence," she explains. "And while I was finding my independence with that little dress... I also helped other women to be the women they wanted to be." 1625 Massachusetts Ave., NW, 202-861-2625; vital-voices.org **CF**

