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SHOPPING

## In Search of Wardy's Legendary Apparel

June 24, 1988 | KAREN NEWELL YOUNG | Karen Newell Young is a regular contributor to Orange County Life.

Joan Rivers had been in earlier on this particular day, an event that was now causing just the slightest wrinkle in an otherwise-smooth afternoon of retailing, Amen Wardy-style.

The confusion centered on whether actress Deidre Hall had selected anything yet and whether Rivers' dresses had been left in the dressing room where Hall was heading.

With a whisper all was resolved, and hushed attendants, laden with designer dresses, steered Hall into one of the two "important" dressing rooms, which are the size of most people's living rooms.

At Amen Wardy, the high-fashion caterer to Southern California's *couturier* trade, the rich and famous are accustomed to such pampering. The large dressing rooms, with their flowers, cologne, refreshments and fashion magazines, are only the beginning.

The elegant Newport Beach store also has a "clothes mobile" that can hold up to 500 gowns and will make house calls. The store boasts the only David Webb jewelry boutique on the West Coast, plus the world's largest collection of Judith Leiber accessories. Aside from the two largest dressing rooms, where Wardy does personal fittings and the well-known are whisked away for privacy, 15 other dressing rooms double as sales clerk offices, with desks and powder rooms.

The 10-year-old Newport Center Fashion Island site--once the home of a J.C. Penney auto garage--stretches 30,000 square feet and houses thousands of outfits: among the largest collection of designer dresses in the country, says its manager, Soffia Wardy, 21, daughter of the owner.

Every day, limousines and fancy cars line up at the store's opulent marble entrance, spilling the well-heeled into the shop in search of Wardy's legendary offerings: fashions from more than 100 designers, including Galanos, Oscar de la Renta, Valentino, Ungaro, Christian Lacroix, Jenny, Bob Mackie and Krizia.

Shortly before Hall had arrived for her spree, Amen Wardy popped out of a back room and called to Hall's wardrobe consultant, Mary Dell Barkouras: "Did you see the pink Mackie? It would be *perfect* for Deidre!"

He is as much a draw for his pampered clientele as are the chandeliers, the Oriental rugs, the skylights, the elegant furniture, the art and the 15 sales clerks on the floor at all times.

"The owner is almost always here," says Soffia Wardy, a pretty young woman of dark hair and serious demeanor. "People love to see him in; they're disappointed when he's not. You can tell. He adds a spirit that's so hard to explain."

Part of that spirit may be notoriety. As a leader of high fashion in Southern California and sponsor of frequent fashion shows by the biggest designers, Wardy, 48, is often a subject of fashion reports, despite his reputation for shyness. Also contributing to his aura is his legendary association with actresses and other swans among the rich and famous.

On a table in Hall's dressing room is a framed article on a survey describing Rivers as among the world's 12 best-dressed women. It is signed: "Dear Amen, I owe it all to you, love Joan."

Both Soffia and Amen Wardy refuse to name their famous customers, but those seen shopping there include Loni Anderson, Alex Carson, Joan Collins, Jill Ireland, Diahann Carroll, Dolores Hope and Mary Hart.

Some customers drop in from nearby towns, staying an hour or two; others fly in from distant parts, stay at the Four Seasons or other nearby hotels and spend a week prowling the Wardy racks.

Another important ingredient in his retail recipe is Wardy's ability to put together unpredictable fashion elements. He does all the buying, often combining pieces in unusual ways, his daughter says. The total outfits he assembles can't be found elsewhere; they are original creations.

"I love getting the new merchandise in and putting all the looks together," Wardy says. "I love seeing the customers thrilled and ecstatic over what they've gotten here and seeing them feeling good about what they're wearing."

The customers like to feel Wardy has had a personal involvement in the outfits they try on, his daughter says. And many times he has. As Hall entered her dressing room, the selections included a few chosen for her by Wardy.

Along with a \$7,025 Bob Mackie gown were a Jenny suit for \$1,080; a beaded Valentino knit suit reduced from \$10,500 to \$5,250; and a Krizia suit for \$668. But the outfit that captured both Hall and Barkouras' imagination was a dramatic black de la Renta for \$2,000, a dress that Nancy Reagan was photographed in recently for a Women's Wear Daily feature.

The store--with its wholesale inventory of more than \$10 million a year and yearly sales of more than \$25 million--has changed directions throughout its 27-year history. It has dropped several designers and steered away from the men's wear it used to carry and focused on high fashion for women. When Wardy began his retail career in El Paso, he transformed an old stone mansion into the only couture house in town. When he moved to Newport Beach 12 years ago, his Texas customers followed him, often jetting in for a shopping trip. His first Newport Beach shop was on Bayside Drive. After he took over the J.C. Penney auto garage, his clients and reputation grew further, soon requiring another store refurbishment. Now the shop includes a ballroom, scene of many charity luncheons and fashion shows.

The typical Wardy customer, according to Soffia Wardy, is a "mature 25-year-old and older, upper-middle-class to wealthy woman. She is sophisticated and aware of what the designers are doing."

"It's all a matter of life style and love of clothes," she says. "A lot of very wealthy women don't dress this way. They're out on the boat all day or just don't care about clothes. So it's not all a matter of money."

But money does help. The dresses cost \$500 and up--with "up" as high as \$20,000.

For those whose budgets rarely allow a \$20,000 dress purchase, now may be the time to visit Wardy. The store is having a rare sale in the ballroom, where a mere \$1,013 can buy an Ungaro suit or \$5,118 will buy a pale green jacket covered with seashells. Now that's a bargain.

#### AT A GLANCE

Address: 451 Newport Center Drive, Newport Beach

Phone: (714) 720-0255

Merchandise: Thousands of dresses, outfits, gowns by the world's best-known designers, including Ungaro, Galanos, Valentino, Lacroix and Oscar de la Renta. Manager Soffia Wardy says the store's Valentino collection is the largest in the country. Also, world's largest collection of Judith Leiber accessories. Store includes the only David Webb jewelry boutique on the West Coast and a large shoe salon.

Price range: Dresses from \$500 and up.

What to look for: Sterling silver and spangled Judith Leiber "cat" handbag, \$2,045. Bright pink Ungaro cocktail dress with pouf sleeves, \$5,310; Bob Mackie beaded gown, \$9,820.