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Model agency head sets out to change the face of fashion

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The average supermodel stands about five-foot-ten and wears a size two dress.

The average woman is five-foot-four and wears a size 14 dress.

Is there a problem here?

A lot of people think there is. And Ben Barry is doing something about it.

Barry is the 24-year-old head of a Toronto-based modelling agency (the Ben Barry Agency). And while his personal story is fascinating, his self-proclaimed mission -- to change the face of fashion -- is attracting even more attention.

Barry talked about his goals Monday at a lecture presented at UWO's Windermere Manor and sponsored by the **Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children**, which is a collaborative venture of the university, Fanshawe College and the London Co-ordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse.

Barry's personal tale is an unlikely one.

At age 14 -- and not yet even in high school -- Barry decided to help a female friend who'd spent \$3,000 on a modelling school but couldn't find work. Convinced his friend was beautiful, Barry sent her portfolio to a local Ottawa magazine.

When the magazine called him back ("You must be her agent," the caller stated) and offered to hire his friend, Barry embarked on his career as a modelling agent -- even though at that time he'd never seen a contract, let alone negotiated one, and had to use the fax machine at his mother's workplace.

But it was that brazen mix of ambition and naivete that caused Barry to question some of the fashion industry's fundamental assumptions.

First, he noticed that models were judged solely on the basis of their physical appearance, with no attention paid to the qualities -- such as intelligence, humour and spirit -- that helped make them attractive.

He recalled how one of his young clients was invited to a photo session in New York City, where he watched in amazement as a team of experts spent about five hours preparing the young woman's hair, makeup and clothes. Then her photographs were, in Barry's words, "digitally sandpapered" by visual technicians to further "perfect" the images.

When the photographs were published, Barry was floored by the reactions of his friends. Even though he explained how unrealistic the pictures were, his young friends still compared themselves to the doctored images, despairing that they would never look like her.

In response, Barry created an agency that represents models of all ages, sizes, races and abilities. And he tries to convince fashion companies their customers will be more satisfied -- and more likely to buy their products -- if they see models that resemble themselves.

Since its formation in 1995, Barry's agency has supplied models for a long list of high-profile clients, including Coca-Cola, Nike, Old Navy and Sears. But it has attracted particular attention for its involvement with Dove's "real beauty" ad campaign, which featured women who don't conform to the ideals -- tall, thin and white -- of the fashion industry.

At Monday's presentation, Barry emphasized we all need to re-evaluate our notions of beauty.

"It's a cultural shift that has to take place," he said. "And each individual has a role to play."

Barry said the fantasies of the fashion world have real-world effects. He said one survey, for instance, showed that seven out of 10 women avoid basic activities because they feel badly about the way they look.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to body-image messages ingrained in the media, he said. And it's crucial parents talk to their kids about these unreasonable expectations.

"When you see a fashion magazine or a billboard, it's important to question it," Barry said in an interview after his presentation. "You need to ask, 'Do you know how that's made?' Or, 'Do you think she actually looks like that?' And, 'Do you know all the work that went into that photograph?' "

Pretending to ignore such ads, he said, is simply unrealistic.

"The fashion industry is part of us," Barry said. "Whether we like it or not."

ON THE WEB: www.BenBarry.com