

Meet Lidia Karabinech

CAREN WEINER CAMPBELL



It's a long way from a Soviet chemistry lab to the ateliers of Manhattan's Fashion Avenue, but Lidia Karabinech has made the journey in less than a decade. "I never thought I'd be here, never in my wildest dreams," the knitwear designer says, sitting in her South Brooklyn living room workshop with a basket of yarn at her feet and two knitting machines lining the far wall. "When I was young I never thought about this career—and in the 1980s coming to the United States [from Ukraine] was like going to the moon."

This down-to-earth lady has seen her design career blast off into orbit. In addition to designing sweaters for Lion Brand Yarns in Manhattan, Lidia has had dozens of her sleek designs published in *Interweave Knits* and other national knitting magazines. She has also created production samples for such top Seventh Avenue designers as Donna Karan and Ellen Tracy. In 1997, Lidia was among the dozens of fashion honchos—including the likes of Bill Blass and Oscar de la Renta—who made garment-themed ornaments for one of President Clinton's Christmas trees. She and the other designers were then invited to the White House to see the well-dressed trees. On a warm summer afternoon, as she sips mint tea and keeps an eye on a pot of borscht bubbling on the stove, the knitting cosmonaut reflects on her strange odyssey.

She certainly never imagined herself knitting for a living. "I liked chemistry, and I liked teaching," she says, describing the decade she spent as a high school instructor in Ukraine. In fact, Lidia spent most of her life preparing for a career in chemistry: At age 15, she left home to attend a four-year chemistry program, then she worked in a fertilizer laboratory for a year before beginning her university studies. At the University of Kiev she met fellow student Vassili Karabinech; they married in 1980, and Lidia went on to become a chemistry teacher in Vassili's hometown of Uzhgorod, in the Carpathian mountains of western Ukraine. Having a university degree, she recalls, actually meant that one got paid less—the prestige of being educated was thought to be its own reward. This principle dovetailed with Communist philosophy: "Politically, they said, we were a country for workers, not for intellectuals," she explains. "It was hard, but when you don't see a better life, you think what they say is okay."

Along with everything else, the 1980s weren't a particularly easy time to be a knitter. Though Lidia had plenty of experience, having learned the craft from her mother at age eight, the Ukraine stores carried little to spark her creative imagination. "In stores it was usually just very thin, pure Merino wool," she remembers. "And it was only one color, cornflower blue.

Maybe that was the best dye, I don't know." To make one Norwegian-style yoke sweater, she recalls, she had to bleach some of the blue yarn to get the three additional shades of blue she needed. (She later unraveled that sweater to reuse the yarn in a dress for her daughter Olga, born in 1984.)

In the early 1990s, the fall of the Soviet regime loosened the restrictions on travel by citizens. As a result, in 1993, Vassili was able to visit relatives living in New York City, where he suddenly fell ill. "To be with him, we came here, for about half a year," Lidia says of herself and her daughter. And while they were here, they realized that life in the United States would offer great opportunities—especially for eight-year-old Olga. Lidia's limited English meant that teaching chemistry was out of the question, so at first the family of three had to subsist on a family income of a mere \$350 per week. "Somebody told me I was lucky," Lidia remembers now. "My mother gave me something in my hands that would help me always find work."

That person was right. Later that year Lidia began making knitted production samples for Berta Karapetyan, who had contracts with several Seventh Avenue designers. Their collaboration continued, and in 1996 Berta hired Lidia to work at her yarn shop School Products, located near the Fashion Institute of Technology and New York's famed Garment District. At School Products, Lidia managed production for design companies, gave customers knitting-machine lessons, and helped with the store's invoices and purchase orders. Meanwhile, she had also earned her certification as a Microsoft network administrator, but she found the corporate job-hunting process dauntingly competitive. "For me it's hard to say how good I am," she says. "We Ukrainians or Russians weren't taught to do it. We learned that if you are good, people will see it."

Fortunately, people did. *Knits* contributing editor Adina Klein came to work at School Products in 1999. "Adina is my angel," Lidia says now. "She was the one who proposed to me to do sweaters for *Knits*. It all began with that. They were the first people to tell me I could do some design work." Lidia's first pattern—a striped French-sailor sweater modeled after one worn by Coco Chanel—appeared in the Summer 2000 issue of *Knits*, and it was the first of many more patterns to come. "Now I do one or two designs for almost every issue of *Knits*," Lidia says with satisfaction. The year 1999 proved to be an eventful one for her—she stopped working at the store and started her own company, LNK Knitwear. She also currently works as an in-house designer for String, a new Manhattan yarn shop.

designer profile

Says Adina, who became the design editor for Lion Brand Yarns and is now the creative director of String, “I think Lidia’s one of the best designers out there; she has a great sense of style. And she can see what the finished sweater will look like just by examining a skein of yarn.” Last winter, Lion Brand teamed up with *Better Homes and Gardens* to publish a promotional magazine called *Knit It!* That first issue featured nine of Lidia’s designs (including a cardigan pattern, a crocheted kid mohair shawl, and a sleeveless cowl-neck shell)—and that’s not counting the sweaters pictured in the Lion Brand ads. “I am so proud when they put my designs on the labels,” she says.

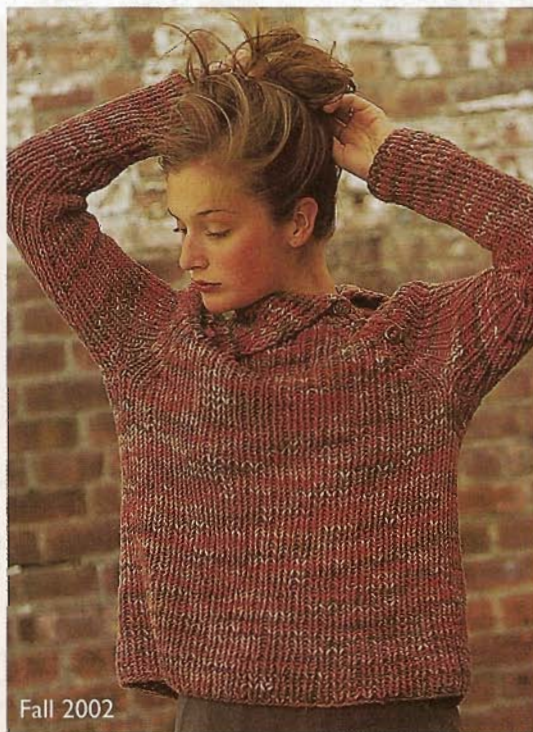
When not at String, a typical day for Lidia begins around 8 a.m., when she sits down to write patterns (“I don’t like writing them,” she says, “so I do them first”). At first, pattern-writing was hard for Lidia because of the specialized terminology, but the calculations, she says, have never been a problem. “For me it’s not a big deal to change a size from a small to a 3X, because I have the gauge, and I’m good at math.” After that, she knits and crochets all day in front of the television; she’s particularly fond of the Russian-language channel. “I got addicted to one soap opera,” she confesses. “At five in the afternoon I have to watch it.” On any given day she may be knitting or crocheting garments for catalogs, fashion shows (including those presented by celebrity crocheter Vanna White), or small-label boutique production runs.

Lidia’s philosophy of design is as understated as her manner. “I don’t think I am so creative, actually,” she demurs. “I think

I have good technique.” Indeed, the classic contours of her elegant designs result from rigorously calculated construction—but they’re not hard to execute. Lidia believes that most knitters prefer simple designs. “People want a garment they can do themselves easily,” she says. “Most people don’t want to work on a sweater for half a year. “Her color choices are often inspired by nature, she says, and she finds her own creativity stimulated by the work of other designers: “I go higher; I see what I can do better.” In fact, that’s one reason she enjoys the contract work she does for other, bigger designers. “I like it when they want something complicated and you can practice stitches,” she says. “You learn from this.”

With this attitude, it’s not surprising that the Karabinech family now embodies the immigrant success story. Vassili has a job at a local wholesale company, and Olga, who graduated last spring from Manhattan’s elite Stuyvesant High School, has just left home for the University of Michigan to study business law. As Lidia reflects on her life, she expresses an up-by-your-bootstraps philosophy that’s 100-percent all-American. “If you sit on the couch and wait for someone to give you something, it’s not going to happen,” she says. “In my country, not everybody could get what they deserve. Here I know, if I work hard, I will.”

Caren Weiner Campbell, who learned to knit at the age of seven, is a freelance writer living in New York City. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Real Simple*, and *Salon*.



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