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Entrepreneur throws hats in ring

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Chicago woman vying for Country Living contest title

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By Dawn Reiss | Special to the Tribune
June 3, 2009



Jenny Gerst displays her hats to the judges at the "A Celebration of Creativity: 2009 Entrepreneurs" at the Navy Pier Grand Ballroom on May 30, 2009. (Photo for the Tribune by Yvette Marie Dostatni / June 3, 2009)

Jenny Gerst knew this was her moment. But three minutes to sell hopes and dreams isn't a lot of time. Hands sweating, cue cards ready, she clenched the stopwatch as she prepared for her sales pitch in a [Navy Pier](#) conference room.

The letter from Country Living magazine inviting her came to her Bronzeville home a month ago. Gerst had thought it was a standard response to the "pitch your product contest" she had entered. But after reading the first congratulatory word, she started crying and hugging her fiancé. Things like this don't usually happen to a 31-year-old hatmaker, especially from a magazine you've been subscribing to since you were 14. But here she was last weekend, with 108 other women from the Chicago area and around [the U.S.](#) All hoped to snag one of the seven or eight spots to be featured in the magazine as an entrepreneur success story.

Their paths were different but surprisingly similar. In an economy like this, more women are trying to go into business for themselves.

"It's like 'American Idol,'" said Francis G. Bailey, Country Living deputy style editor. "You look at their talent and then you listen to their stories."

Gerst's love of hats started as a little girl. Growing up in Kokomo, Ind., she loved to play dress-up, and her grandmother's trunk was the perfect place to go shopping. Floppy and big brimmed, the hats in the trunk matched eclectic garments, her grandmother's silver jacket with fur trim.

She was in 5th grade when her mother gave her what became her favorite childhood adornment. It was a cloche, a bell-shaped hat, like some of the styles she makes now, burgundy and black with velvet trim. Instead of trips to the Gap, Gerst spent her junior high allowance on vintage store accessories. When she was in high school, one of her mother's friends, Lindsay Ray, a costume designer from London, taught Gerst the basics of design at fashion shows and museums.

Later, Gerst moved to Chicago, designing and constructing costumes for theaters, Cirque du Soleil, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and the 2004 movie "Outing Riley." She also designed a [Grammy Awards](#) dress for comedian Margaret Cho.

It wasn't until 2007, when Gerst, a saleswoman at Conference Plus, decided to follow her passion for hatmaking and begin formal millinery training at TLD Design Center & Gallery

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