

The New York Times

## City Room

Blogging From the Five Boroughs

September 15, 2009, 11:12 am

### Two Fashion Stalwarts, Reared on Same Bronx Catwalk

By [Joseph Berger](#)

Nick Laham/Getty Images; Franco Origlia/Getty Images Ralph Lauren, left, and Calvin Klein grew up in the Norwood section of the Bronx.

This being [Fashion Week](#) in New York, it seems worthwhile to recall that two of the icons of fashion grew up a few blocks from each other in the same striver neighborhood in the Bronx.

[Ralph Lauren](#) (né Lifshitz) and [Calvin Klein](#) were raised in the Norwood neighborhood along Mosholu Parkway in the 1940s and 1950s, with Mr. Klein living in an apartment house at 3191 Rochambeau Avenue and Mr. Lauren in an apartment building on Kossuth Avenue overlooking the parkway itself, according to Lloyd Ultan, the Bronx historian. They spent time at the same combined elementary and junior high school — Public School 80 — though roughly four years apart.

They may never have met. But they both came from working-class homes where immigrant parents were trying to clamber their way another few rungs up the economic ladder. Mr. Klein's father was a salaried employee in his brother's grocery; Mr. Lauren's father was a house painter. The neighborhood was filled with relatively low-rise apartment houses — most with bathrooms right inside the apartment — and single-family houses, often attached. Its mostly Italian, Irish and Jewish residents felt they were lucky to have ended up on the leafy greenway of the local boulevard, Mosholu Parkway, and their teenage children hung out, joked and flirted while sitting on the rails that gird the parkway's lawns.

But what was it about that small neighborhood that nourished such stylish tastes in fashion?

“It couldn't have been the choice of clothing stores on Jerome Avenue,” said [Fernando Ferrer](#), the Bronx borough president from 1987 to 2001. “They probably had to invent their own.”

But Mr. Ferrer, who as a child bought his duds at Mel Greene's clothing store in Hunts Point, thinks he sees some of their Bronx-bred ambition in the look of their clean-cut contemporary clothes.

“These are working-class guys — they were neither poor nor wealthy, and it’s interesting that their clothes are aspirational,” he said. “Ralph Lauren designs preppy, polo type clothes. That wasn’t his experience then. So does Calvin Klein — elegance, simplicity.”

[Barry Lewis](#), an architectural historian who has done documentary tours of the city neighborhoods for Channel 13, uses similar language in speculating on this curious geographical coincidence.

“People who lived up there had the aspirations of the middle class, of whatever the middle class had aspirations for. And the neighborhood was not too far from Westchester, and the Center of WASP existence is somewhere in the Westchester-Connecticut area.”

Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University, thinks there was a universal Bronx hunger underlying the coincidence.

“What they both had in common was a terrific desire to escape,” he said. “What made the Bronx so powerful was the engine driving these people out. The subway was connected to Manhattan.”

[Mr. Ultan](#), the historian and author, pointed out that many people along Mosholu Parkway would have had connections with the rag trade since it was a heavily Jewish business.

And [Jenna Weissman Joselit](#), a cultural historian at George Washington University who has written on clothing, placed her emphasis on both designers’ backgrounds as the children of immigrants in a neighborhood with many such children.

“Immigrants are unfinished people,” she said. “Their parents came at an age where they hadn’t fully internalized the mores of Eastern Europe and here they were too busy to absorb the mores of America. So they’re unfinished and trying things on for size.”

Ralphie Lifshitz, was born in 1939, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants who raised him in a four-room apartment overlooking Mosholu Parkway, according to “Genuine Authentic: The Real Life of Ralph Lauren” by Michael Gross and several web biographies. His father was a house painter and his parents sent him to Salanter Yeshiva in the Bronx. For his bar mitzvah, he wore a blazer, a daring deviation from the dark suits his Orthodox peers wore. He also listened to Frank Sinatra, had a talent for drawing and an eye for the clothes that he more stylish neighbors wore.

“I was always inspired by those kind of prep-school people and their clothes,” Mr. Lauren himself once said. “By classic things, by the way those people looked and dressed. Maybe because I didn’t have it, I always reached for it.”

It was as a teenager at that he developed a taste for stylish clothes himself. He went to nearby Clinton High School, spent some time at the downtown Baruch campus of City

College and dropped out and took a job as a salesman at Brooks Brothers — a few years before his four-inch wide ties made him a celebrity at Bloomingdale's.

Calvin Klein, born in November 1942, was the son of a Hungarian immigrant, Leo Klein, who worked in his brother's grocery store, according to "The House of Klein: Fashion, Controversy, and a Business Obsession." Young Calvin often accompanied his mother, Flo, on shopping trips to Loehmann's, the discounter of high-end fashion, and often visited his grandmother's tailoring business. Like other ambitious neighborhood youngsters, he took dance lessons at the a studio owned by the mother of his neighbors, film director Penny Marshall and producer Gary Marshall.

He, too, was a talented sketch artist and was asked to paint a mural on the fifth floor of P.S. 80's hallway. Rather than go to Clinton, he took the subway to Manhattan to the High School of Industrial Art, where he concentrated on fashion illustration. After graduating, he chose the Fashion Institute of Technology, where he began to study American designers who shaped his minimalist design.

In an online review, Bernadine Morris, the former fashion writer for The New York Times, recalled how as a new reporter at The Times who had gone to Hunter College's uptown campus — now Lehman College — in the Bronx, she suggested an article about a remarkable coincidence involving rising fashion stars who both grew up in the northern Bronx. The designers — two staples of New York Fashion Week, which ends Thursday — were rejecting snobbish and elaborate French designs for clean-cut lines.

The editors weren't interested, but she still remembered the headline she suggested: "The Boys from Mosholu Parkway."