

## CHICAGOLAND EXTRA

# Entrepreneur throws hats in ring

Chicago woman vying for Country Living contest title

By Dawn Reiss  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

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 hoping 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."



Jenny Gerst displays nine of her handmade hats as she makes her pitch to judges for Country Living magazine in a contest for entrepreneurs. Gerst, one of 109 competitors, won't know how she fared until July. YVETTE MARIE DOSTATNI/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

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 like 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 Con-

ference Plus, decided to follow her passion for hatmaking and begin formal millinery training at TLD Design Center & Gallery in Westmont. Her plan was to move to Italy and start a hatmaking business there. But then she met her fiancé, Bart Pfanenstiel. Instead of Italy, Gerst launched her business, Formé Millinery, from her Chicago home. She and Pfa-

nenstiel are getting married in September.

But at that moment at Navy Pier, all she could think about was three minutes, presenting in front of two judges. Suitcase in hand, she toted her eight hats, with a ninth, a black mesh cocktail hat with gold ribbon woven in, tipped forward on her head. A timer in the background started the stopwatch immediately, as Gerst began setting up her hats on a table and answering questions.

"Are you Jenny? How long have you been in business?" asked Natalie Warady, Country Living style and market director. Gerst's hands moved quickly as she placed her favorite orange straw hat with its large Kentucky Derby-eque features on a mannequin. The hats are straw, horsehair and wool. Each is uniquely named, like "Beaded Delight" with its white flower embellishments on black wool. Margaret Josephs, founder of The MacBeth Collection decoupage storage containers, was a judge and one of Country Living's winners from last year. Warady and Josephs cooed over a knit baby hat with blue stars. Gerst began her pitch:

"They are handmade, one-of-a-kind hats," she said. "I'm known for my rare antique materials and embellishments. It's vintage fashion for all generations."

Before long, the timer stopped Gerst in mid-thought. She'll have to wait until July to find out if she is chosen.

"I think it went well," she said. "But I'm glad it's over."