

La Isla

SLO inspires designer's bold move



ENRIQUE SANCHEZ-RIVERA pictured here on the morning before his fateful drive north

One of the world's hottest bathing suit designers has just moved into town. And, for someone who has made a career out of discovering beauty, it is understandable that Colombian-born fashion designer Enrique Sanchez-Rivera has chosen San Luis Obispo as the new home for his La Isla bathing suit brand. The only surprise is how it all happened.

Recently, while he was in Santa Barbara, Sanchez-Rivera decided to blow off some steam after a particularly intense photo shoot. So he took a quick drive up the coast. By chance, he pulled off at Marsh Street, which led him into downtown San Luis Obispo. Recalls Sanchez-Rivera, "It immediately captured me, it was just so beautiful, the weather was perfect. It had a really good energy, a good vibe and the beach is right here, which is a requirement for me."

Sanchez-Rivera, who had grown up in Colombia, left to attend college on the East Coast and started his career on Wall Street with a large mutual fund company. During one of his many visits back home, he walked into his old bedroom where he was surprised to find a huge pile of bikinis. He asked his sister what it was all about, and she replied that she had made them and was giving them to her friends. Sanchez-Rivera was intrigued. He brought some back to New York and gave them to a friend who owned a modeling agency there. One of the suits was used in a fashion shoot. The stylists and models raved about the bikinis.

Spotting an opportunity, Sanchez-Rivera set out to get the suits into retailers around Manhattan. "I literally went door-to-door after work. I'd empty my brown Bali suitcase that

my mom had given me - it had belonged to my grandfather - and I'd take out all my paperwork and stuff it full of bikinis," remembers Sanchez-Rivera. "But, I just got completely ripped apart by the buyers. They told me to get out of the business, that I had no idea what I was doing."

Undaunted, the young designer continued to refine the product with seamstresses in his native Colombia. He also began working with renowned fashion designer, Cedella Marley (daughter to Bob Marley). And, through her Catch a Fire label, Sanchez-Rivera's design made its way to Miss Jamaica's appearance in the Miss Universe competition. But, the real break came one day when *Sports Illustrated* called. "I had all of their numbers programmed into my cell phone because I sent them samples... I started to give them instructions as to how to return the suits, just as I did each year, and the person on phone said, 'Wait, wait... I'm calling to tell you that La Isla has been chosen to appear in the Swimsuit Edition,'" recounts Sanchez-Rivera.

Not only did his suit make its way into the all-important Swimsuit Edition, but it appeared on the cover girl. Sanchez-Rivera and his La Isla brand exploded onto the national scene, and he became an overnight sensation in the industry. Calls poured in from other magazines, such as *Surfing*, and his swimsuit made a cameo on the David Letterman Show.

Despite the notoriety, Sanchez-Rivera comes from an agricultural upbringing - he remembers rising at 4am as a child to help make cheese that he wrapped in plantain leaves with his grandmother - whose culture is on the other end of the spectrum from the fast-paced world of fashion. So, perhaps it is not so hard to understand why he chose the easy-going Central Coast to set up shop after all. Today, the designer, who spends a lot of time looking for ways to give back, has ongoing charitable partnerships with the Surfrider Foundation, Children of the Americas, and the Ocean Futures Society. He stresses that, "As crazy as this sounds: money means nothing to me. Nothing." Instead he cites the fact that he employs 70 full-time, head of household seamstresses in Colombia as his most important accomplishment to-date. "Things are tough down there, and some of these women who started working for me were homeless; they couldn't afford school for their kids. Then, two or three years later that changed. The difference I can make by doing this is enormous." **SLO LIFE**