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Celebrating his first anniversary as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador, Gavin Rajah pledges support to tech education for girls

By Yvonne Duncan

Cape Town, 14 August, 2008...Leading South African couturier Gavin Rajah, today marked his first anniversary as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador by pledging support to the work of the global children's organisation in transforming the lives of children, especially girls, through education.

"Never have I found such fulfilment in being able to use my talent and profile to help change the lives of others less fortunate than myself," Mr. Rajah told journalists, following his high profile annual show and fundraising dinner for UNICEF at Cape Town Fashion Week.

Opportunities for Girls

In an expansion of his work with UNICEF, Mr. Rajah in his second year, will work even more closely with the children's organisation to develop new corporate alliances and other projects that support education, with a special eye on technology opportunities for girls.

The only fashion icon in the UNICEF network of goodwill ambassadors, Rajah said he was inspired by the caring learning environments and school-supported child headed households he had visited on a field trip for UNICEF to Kwa-Mashu, a township near Durban in KwaZulu Natal Province.

According to UNICEF, Mr. Rajah is presently championing a mission to engage corporate support for the start-up and monitoring of UNICEF's work to equip 25 schools in the Western Cape Province with school connectivity by the end of 2009.

"I want to begin by helping children in this province, where I live and work," he said. The programme, under his direct patronage, will focus on instilling science and technology education and skills in girls through in-school training and external mentorships. These schools also feature the child led GEM (Girls Education Movement) clubs, a UNICEF initiative, which provide opportunities for advancement, socialisation and lifeskills training for girls, with boys as strategic allies.

Education closely linked to child protection

Over the past year, South Africa has made major strides in children's development by adopting new legislation to ensure their protection and well being. Of particular interest to Mr. Rajah, a legal advocate, who is passionate about child protection, is the signing into law of the Children's Amendment Act by the South African President, earlier this year.

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The Government has also made strong commitments to improving the quality of education for boys and girls in the nation's worst schools, in line with its commitment to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

"Education has close links to the protection of children," Mr Rajah observed. "Education can help reduce the vulnerability of orphans, especially girls, provide them with the knowledge they need to resist sexual coercion, manage the power relations between girls and older men and help them make better choices with respect to their quality of life. At the same time it opens doors to a better and more secure future through learning," he said.

Creating improvements at 585 most under resourced schools

UNICEF partners with the Department of Education to provide safe and child-friendly learning environments for all children. Currently, work is directed at creating improvements for a first batch of nearly 300,000 high school learners at 585 schools in all nine provinces.

At its peak, full roll-out by 2010, the programme will reach all children at the 585 most under resourced schools and school communities in the country as identified by the Department of Education

Rajah said he plans to actively promote the goals of the Safe and Child Friendly Schools programme and to emphasise the value of science and technology education in his work for UNICEF.

"Working with UNICEF has allowed me to experience and see the tangible difference that can be made in transforming lives when children have access to quality education in a safe learning environment and supported by a caring family and community. That is the best reward."

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Photographs from the show can be obtained from Total Media

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