

Biting the BIG APPLE

New York's bright lights – and America's J1 work visa – continue to inspire young Australians to pursue their dreams and make it big in the city that never sleeps

WORDS SARAH HENDER

Molly Edwards can't remember a time when she didn't know what she wanted to do with her life. When she was getting dressed in the mornings, her mother would say: "Molly, this isn't a fashion parade."

"Well," says Molly, "finally, my life IS a fashion parade!"

Armed with a Bachelor of Design from Melbourne's Whitehouse Institute of Design, the 23-year-old from Bordertown is now based in New York pursuing her dream of working as a fashion designer.

Edwards is one of many young Australians taking advantage of the J1 visa, issued under the Student Work and Holiday program introduced by the US Department of State a decade ago.

The program enables Australian tertiary-level accredited students and students who have graduated from a Bachelor degree within the past 12 months to live, work and travel in the US for up to a year with no need for employer sponsorship.

Embarking on her career, Edwards knew that New York was a place that offered more opportunities than other major world cities for junior roles in the fashion industry. In such a role, she would be able to learn about the industry from the bottom up.

Edwards landed a role with Everlane, an online clothing retailer she has long admired for its ethical and sustainable manufacturing, and transparency to their customers. Everlane is US-based and currently ships outside of the US to Canada, Australia and, more recently, Hong Kong.

Thanks to the availability of its clothing in Australia, Edwards had been aware of Everlane and its ethical philosophy long before she arrived in the US in April last year.

Edwards holds a paid "floor leader" role with the company. She works in what is known as the "fit studio", a modern concept of a showroom offering sample clothes to try on and to purchase online using desktop computers located inside the store.

Edwards organises the personal styling program for Everlane's customers and works one on one with people to come up with a wardrobe that suits them. She also works with the company's travel team, visiting different cities to set up concept stores for a weekend to sell stock around the country.

Edwards' goal is to be involved in technical design. The company is supportive with

"...the opportunities are endless if you're willing to put yourself out there and work hard."



management encouraging her to sit in on technical design meetings and assist from time to time with sketches or construction. There is always plenty of interaction between the design teams, giving her plenty of opportunities to connect with all the people in the company who can help her in her chosen career path.

Now with her J1 visa expired, Everlane is sponsoring Edwards to stay in the US for the next two years on an E3 visa, which is available exclusively to Australians to work in the US under certain conditions – such as working in a specialty occupation with at least a bachelor's degree.

Edwards grew up on a mixed crop and sheep farm in Bordertown and spent her senior school years attending a private school as a boarder in Adelaide. The contrast between her current life and growing up in a small community where everyone knows each other couldn't be more extreme.

"It's amazing living here. It's incredibly

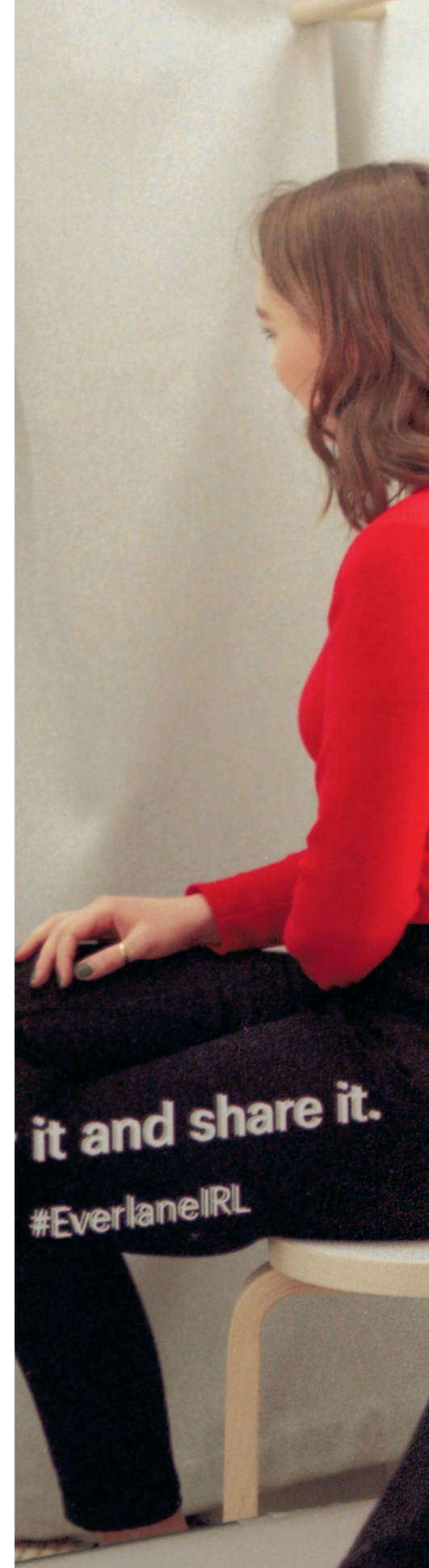
diverse. Just walking down the street, especially in Brooklyn, you never hear anyone speaking English. There are communities of people living here all speaking their native language together."

New York could potentially be overwhelming for a country girl but Edwards believes that living in Brooklyn has protected her from the craziness that is Manhattan.

When a friend of her mother's was moving out of her Brooklyn apartment, and heard that Edwards and her boyfriend, Steve, were coming to live in New York, she suggested that they take over the apartment.

It is in a large, old three-storey house offering plenty of space, big trees and proximity to the subway.

"It's beautiful, a lovely little escape," Edwards says. "I think being in Manhattan all the time would be exhausting. It is so loud and smelly as well. There's just a lot going on. I'm really happy to come back here and be out of that. We love the space here."



Weekends are spent exploring the many boroughs of Brooklyn. Steve, is a foodie so there are always new restaurants to discover and unexpected surprises.

Stumbling upon a small luxury vintage clothing store in their neighbourhood recently, they got chatting to its owner, Gene, who pointed out an old typewriter that was on display. "But," he said, "it has a different use now!"

Typing a word on the keys, a bookshelf behind it swung open revealing a candlelit speak-easy. Dumbfounded, the couple sat down to enjoy the cocktails that Gene whipped up for them.

Edwards' first few weeks in New York made her feel like she was living on a movie set. She is used to it now but remains in awe of the city she currently calls home.

"There is so much going on, there is nothing you can't do, nothing you can't access, nothing you can't eat or watch ... everything is there!" she says.



Graphic designer Eli Hochberg, far left, works for advertising agency Droga5; Aspiring fashion designer Molly Edwards, left, works for Everlane (Pictures: James J Robinson); Photographer James J Robinson, above, wants to be a film maker (Picture: Maya Hirasedo)

Working with brands like Google and Mastercard might seem beyond a graphic designer fresh out of an Australian university but that's what happened when Eli Hochberg, now 26, moved to New York in 2015 from his home town of Bondi, Sydney.

After a stint at summer school at Parsons University in New York in 2013, Hochberg fell in love with the city.

"Summers in New York are so much fun. There's so much going on, the whole thing is alive. Creatively, with all the art galleries and museums around, people are really inspired."

Hochberg decided then that he would one day return to live and work there – an opportunity for Australians thanks to our close ties with the US.

"I work with people from all over the world and they find it so much harder to get visas to come over here," he says.

"I think that's part of the reason that New York seems to be full of Australians."

Hochberg works for a large advertising agency called Droga5, which was started by David Droga, an Australian, in 2006. It is now one of the largest agencies in New York, with about 700 employees.

Hochberg began work there in June of last year, having spent his first year in New York as a freelance graphic designer for some of the top design agencies, including Pentagram, and working on projects like the rebranding of Mastercard.

Droga5 now sponsors Hochberg on an E3 visa, enabling him to work for them for two years with the possibility of an extension. His most recent project was working on the Google Pixel 2 phone campaign.

"Sometimes you can forget the scale of what you are working on when you are dealing with each design problem but then you walk down the street with friends and see a billboard with your work on it. That is always a pinch yourself moment," he says.

Creating campaigns and working closely

with major brands is a buzz but it has its challenges, too.

"There's a lot of voices and opinions, a lot of people you need to satisfy and convince. Also, just because of the scale of it, there are so many factors to consider," Hochberg says.

Dealing with the top marketing people at Google when just out of university has meant that Hochberg has felt he has had to step up his game. Consequently, he says his career is progressing much faster than it would have if he had stayed in Australia.

People go to New York to pursue their dreams, not because it is an easy city to live in.

"It is one of the toughest, most competitive cities in the world," he says. "You're constantly dealing with setbacks and stress. It is expensive, you are always moving around with accommodation, jobs and visa issues. It is not a place to chill and go with the flow."

Growing up in Bondi, the lack of a beach in New York has been a tough adjustment. But beach or no beach, Hochberg is staying put.

He says living and working in New York is not for everybody, and you have to be able to get into that big city thing. "If you can do that, the opportunities are endless if you're willing to put yourself out there and work hard."

If you have big ambitions, it's a good idea to get a headstart. James J Robinson, 22, from Melbourne, did just that.

At 17, while studying film and television at Swinburne University of Technology, Robinson set up a creative collective called "AVO", which brought together all of the best young photographers in Melbourne and listed them in an online directory providing photographic services to clients including several from New York.

This was all Robinson needed when he decided to make the big move to New York, something he had wanted to do since he was a high school student. AVO provided an entry point into the photographic industry and social media site Instagram let him both showcase his portfolio of work online and connect with people, so picking up work when he landed in the big smoke wasn't hard.

Robinson wants to be a film maker but knows he needs more years to make it in that industry. In the meantime, photography is an important step.

He arrived in New York in April 2017, and his career has taken off. He knows why.

"The stakes are higher here so I feel the challenge of trying to improve every time I work," he says. "I want to impress everyone and be recommended to the next client."

"In Melbourne I was always working for people I know because the creative community is so small. I felt like I was essentially working for friends. Here, it is completely professional. I mostly don't know the clients, they are a lot older than me and it's a lot scarier."

Despite that, Robinson is grateful that he didn't end up coming to New York when he was younger. Instead, he has had three years at university developing his own style and experimenting with his craft in a place where the stakes are lower, and the community is small and supportive. By the time Robinson did arrive, he was confident about his work and he already had several New York clients.

In a short time, Robinson has achieved some serious career highlights. New York Fashion Week in 2017 saw him working as the behind-the-scenes photographer for Rihanna's production team on her Fenty x Puma by Rihanna collection. The event received massive press coverage and the excitement on the night was palpable. Robinson met Rihanna. It was a thrill.

"She had two seconds to meet me but two seconds was enough!" he says.

Robinson was also asked to shoot a number of album covers for the popular Danish musician MØ last year. He's also getting experience on a film set, recently returning from Los Angeles shooting the stills, poster and publicity photography for a comedy film.

"It's fun being on a set of that size but also a little scary at the age of 22. Everyone is a lot older than me so I've grown this moustache to try to look a bit older so I get treated a bit more normally. It's worked!"

To top off those achievements, Robinson last year signed a contract to be a contributing photographer to *The New York Times*.

New York will be home for Robinson for the next three years having been granted a visa that is only given to those at the top of their field in a creative industry.

It provides him with the right to work as a freelancer with no need to explain to anyone where or for whom he works.

One thing is not in doubt. If you live in New York, be prepared to put in the hard yards. For a 22-year-old hailing from the relatively relaxed vibe of Melbourne's close-knit creative community, this was an adjustment for Robinson.

"I have learnt that if I want to make it here I really have to work hard. If you slack off at any point, it is very easy to lose your footing and lose everything you've been working for." •

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