

National Post

Super success -- at a cost: At age 15, international model Noot Seear's life appears to be the height of glamour. But is there any time for fun when you're wanted on runways in New York, Paris, and Milan?

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Color Photo: Marina Dodis / Seear enjoys a quiet moment at home in Vancouver.

Color Photo: Mary Rozzi / Meet Noot Seear She's a supermodel from Vancouver She earns up to \$35,000 (US) a day and she's only 15 (Photo ran of 01).

Noot Seear is standing in line at a Vancouver coffee shop waiting for a latte. Dressed in a sporty outfit, she flashes me a big smile, a startling contrast to her long, stringy hair and nails bitten down to the bone. She looks like your average 15-year-old, not a pouty model who has taken the tough New York fashion world by storm. But that's what she is. Proof is in the string of Polo and Yves Saint Laurent ads in current issues of heavyweight fashion magazines. Of course, she does have the model requisites, too: She's tall, skinny, and has an air of confidence that's remarkable for 15.

It's in her eyes you find her particular charm, and in the farm-fresh country face of an English beauty. That's what a talent scout noticed at a Vancouver shopping mall just over a year ago. Transformed overnight from a horse-riding tomboy into one of New York's hottest models, Seear now graces the pages of Glamour, Details, and Elle. The black and white Polo ads feature her, with windblown hair and a midriff-baring tank top, holding an electric guitar and playfully pushing a young man. She is the Mona Lisa in the Yves Saint Laurent ads. And this month, there are 12

pages devoted exclusively to Seear in Marie Claire magazine.

"For her first year in business, she's extraordinarily successful," her Vancouver agent Selena Wallace says. "She just hit it big day one." Wallace says Seear has the "it factor," a combination of beauty and personality. "She has the look of what's going on right now. She's so unpretentious -- a kooky little kid who trips over stuff. It's really refreshing." After only one month in New York, Seear was placed with the agency that made Claudia Schiffer's career. She started working right away for the big magazines such as Glamour. For most models, Wallace says, it takes about two years to get started in New York.

In some of the ads, Seear looks 17, in some, 25. But in all of them, she is selling sex. That can't be easy for someone in her mid-teens. Of course, her age means she is still protected by law from the sexual advances of men; she isn't old enough to have a driver's licence or a glass of beer. Yet there she is, living alone in New York, working six days a week, 12 hours a day. As one of New York's youngest models, Seear often has her mother staying with

her. But not always. If she's alone, the agency manager will occasionally take her to dinner. For the most part, though, she's on her own. She takes cabs to work and the subway home; she makes herself dinner and breakfast. No time for school. No time for fun.

She tells me she often gets homesick, that it's hard living alone, having to clean the apartment and get to work on time. "Coming home to an empty apartment is really lonely," she says. "I sort of let go of part of my life to be an adult."

As we sit with our coffee discussing her New York life, watching the beach and the people passing by, a group of teenagers stumbles into the cafe shaking sand off their clothes and laughing. They notice Seear and a cacophony of shrieks and how-are-yous and hugs ensues. These are her high school friends. They discuss getting together that night, but Seear seems noncommittal.

After they leave, Seear seems distracted, saddened that she has to choose between beach volleyball with friends and a lucrative modelling contract. She knows she is missing out big time on teenage life -- parties, sneaking off school grounds to "hack a butt," dating, drinking. But she says she has come too far to turn back now.

"When I see my friends, they seem so young and immature," she says. "We still have fun together, but after being in New York alone, it's hard to come back from that adult person and be a kid again. I try not to be different, but it's like I have two lives."

Still, coming home to Vancouver, where she has spent most of her life, helps. It

reminds her, she says, that she's still "just a kid," still the "regular Noot who cleans her room." When she first moved to New York, she would come home a few weeks every month. Then it turned into a week every month. Now she's lucky if it's a long weekend. "I haven't been home in sooooo long," she says. Two months is a long time for a teenager.

But the teenage Seear, who was named Renata but has gone by "Noot" from an early age, is disappearing. "I feel like I'm living in a fantasy world so different from my friends'. It's hard to keep my head on straight. There is constant pampering at shoots. You get treated differently."

Different as in receiving an invitation to Madonna's birthday party that, her agent tells me, she turned down because there would be too many older people there. Different as in waking up at 6 a.m. in Milan or Paris or New York, rushing out the door for a fitting, then rushing to a studio for makeup and hair for the next runway show. Sometimes there are four runway shows a day. The stress backstage is unbelievable; the shows are always delayed and there's rarely any time to eat.

Her routine doesn't leave much time for partying. Seear says at first she was hanging out with 25-year-old models, but she always felt she was tagging along. Plus, their kind of fun -- going to bars -- wasn't her kind of fun, which is more just "chilling out with friends." For a while, she would walk around New York alone, eat alone, go see movies alone. Now, she says, she has finally found a real friend, a 17-year-old model who has introduced her to all his friends.

I ask her about drugs and the self-abuse for

which modelling is renowned. I ask her what she thinks about Kate Moss, with whom she's worked and who has been treated for an alcohol addiction. "If you want to get into drugs, you can do it anywhere, but if your head is on straight, you can avoid it." I remind her that she mentioned it was hard to keep her head straight in the fantasy world of modelling, but she shrugs it off.

She tells me when she was living at home, her mom gave her lots of freedom. "So when I got to New York, I didn't freak out about not having a curfew because I never had one." Seear admits her father is worried because of her age. "He thinks it will be too much stress and he's scared he's making a decision a regular father wouldn't make."

Dr. Michael Seear, a paediatrician, says the decision to allow his daughter to go to New York was a difficult one. "Any parent would be worried," he says. "At a time in your life when you're nervous about what you look like, having photographers prod and poke you, plus being in New York -- it's a recipe for disaster."

Despite his concern, he says his daughter is strong and he's confident "she won't do anything stupid," like get involved with drugs. He is aware, he says, that many parents would say letting her go and letting her quit school is the wrong thing to do, but what may be right for Noot may be wrong for someone else. For his daughter, he insists, it was the right decision.

Seear says she's learning far more being a model than she would in any school -- learning to pay the bills, cook and clean, navigate one of the largest cities in North America, facilitate a career. She points to her experiences travelling to Milan, Paris,

and London, and to shoots like the one in Alaska, where she posed on an iceberg all day.

Her father, who travels a lot, saw her face on a billboard during a recent trip to South Africa. In London, she was on billboards at a bus stop and in the tube. Seear says he found it surprising at first but now when he sees her, he is pleased and proud. "It's quite strange to see your daughter plastered all over the world. It's nice, really. She's a beautiful child. I don't know where she or my other two daughters came from."

If her parents are now playing a more distant role, Seear's agent in New York has tried to become the replacement. "They do their best to protect her and act as much like a family as they can," Wallace says. "They do their best to prevent her from being around people inappropriate for her at her age where there may be alcohol, drugs, or suggestive clothing."

But at this year's runway shows, Seear says, there were women backstage doing drugs and drinking. As for the suggestive clothing, Seear is wearing a see-through skirt in the Marie Claire spread and she tells me she has had trouble "pulling off" the attitude and posture to go with some of the dresses she has modelled.

For all her discomfort, there are serious financial rewards. Seear can make up to \$35,000 (US) a day for shoots like the Polo ad. Even if her career lasts only a few years, she'll have made more than enough to get her started on the road to another career. And she knows it. "Money doesn't buy happiness," she says, "but it buys freedom, and freedom can buy happiness."

That is the adult Seear talking. I try to

imagine myself financially aware at 15. I try to imagine paying phone bills and a hefty New York rent and meeting with an investment broker. Impossible. I wonder if she really believes this stuff about money buying freedom, or if she heard it from someone else. I remember being impressionable at 15. I remember having no concept of money, spending it all on cigarettes and CDs.

But Seear is an adult living in a teenage body. An adult who understands that her new-found profession can be fickle. That's why she's making no long-term plans. "Right now, things are going really well for me, but I just try to take it day by day. Modelling can turn around so fast. Tomorrow, they may only like redheads."

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