As her fellow seniors scramble to secure jobs in an ever-dwindling economy, Fiber Science and Apparel Design major Constanza Ontaneda ’09 is forging her own path. A designer who grew up in places as divergent as Romania and Brazil, she’s already started her own international business, Bernales & Goretti, which imports fair-wage clothing made in Peru to be sold in the United States. The Sun sat down with Ontaneda in Risley Hall to discuss her passion for fashion, how she hopes to change Peru and her plans after school.

The Sun: How did you get started in design?

Constanza Ontaneda: My earliest memories I have, there’s design in them. For example, when I was seven, eight, nine, when I used to visit [my grandmother] and she wanted me to do something else, she would say, “Oh, go design me a dress.” And I would go and draw a fabulous dress that would never fit her. So I’ve been designing for a very long time.

Sun: Was your grandmother a designer?

C.O.: Yes. She owned the first boutique ever in Lima, Peru. She would go by boat to New York City and get various luxury products and sell them at her boutique in Lima. But when she was around 30-something her husband died and she was left with four children to take care of … She ended up becoming a seamstress/designer for the high class.

Sun: How did this specific project, Bernales & Goretti, start?

C.O.: My stepdad — he and I are like best friends — he decided that he wanted to have a family business when I was a freshman [at Cornell] … And I said, “Ok, yeah, maybe we can have a store in Northampton, [Mass.]” So we did. He took out a million loans and I went to Peru and got my designs done.

Sun: Were the designs ones you had previously worked on?

C.O.: I did everything new. I contacted all the people I knew [in Peru]. It was insane, but it was the most fulfilled I’ve ever been, waking up early and going to bed conked out at eleven o’clock.

Sun: Who did you talk to?

C.O.: I had a teacher of ethnic fashion design in Lima, and she’s been working with seamstresses for decades, so she put them in contact with me.
Sun: Where are the clothes produced?

C.O.: My seamstresses produce things in their homes right now. But we’ve changed the brand name, we have a new target market, everything’s kind of revolutionized right now. We don’t have a store anymore [because] we’ve changed our target market. That store had clothing more for college kids, but we realized that the people who bought the most were older women.

Sun: Where are the names Bernales and Goretti from?

C.O.: My great-grandfather, his name was Sergio Bernales, and he was the most famous doctor ever to have lived — in Peru, even up to today — there are universities and institutes named after him. And Goretti is my business partner’s mother’s middle name.

Sun: Who’s your business partner?

C.O.: Angeline Stuma ’09, she’s in Applied Economics & Management.

Sun: Is she a designer or is she on the business side of things?

C.O.: She’s always been interested in fashion, but she’s definitely on the business/marketing side.

Sun: How will you distribute your clothes?

C.O.: We’re going to distribute them through three ways: we’re going to go to established boutiques first in New York City who cater to our target market and our price point, and we’re going to sell our clothes to them; we’re going to go online; and also through print catalogues. That’s how we’re going to launch.

Sun: When will this be?

C.O.: Probably around New Year’s.

Sun: What would you say is the characteristic look of this new line?

C.O.: What define my designs are bold cuts, strong colors, subtle ethnic details …

Sun: Such as?

C.O.: Such as embroidery or knit textiles from Peru.

Sun: Is the design centered on Peru?

C.O.: I get my influences from my whole life, all my travels, but I can see, looking at my designs, that I have very much a sense of Italian tailoring … But I get extremely inspired and
creative when I’m in Peru. Peru is my primordial inspiration — our Incan and pre-Inca cultures.

Sun: What materials are you using?

C.O.: We plan on differentiating ourselves by using the highest-quality materials, such as alpaca and pure wool, all manufactured in Peru.

Sun: Are you going to be selling your products in Peru?

C.O.: Not yet. The irony with something like this is that in developing countries you first have to be something elsewhere before they will accept you there.

Sun: What items will you be selling?

C.O.: Coats, sweaters, blazers, everything, actually: accessories, silver jewelry… But my fortes are sweaters, coats and dresses, which is probably what we’re going to launch with.

Sun: You major in Fiber Science and Apparel Design. How has that helped you?

C.O.: Oh, it’s helped me very much. I didn’t even know how to sew when I got to Cornell. It’s helped me in understanding pattern-making, the complexities of textile-making. They teach us not only why a fabric is beautiful but how a fabric is made, the chemical components and the weave. It’s reaching a level of expertise that helps one be so rounded. It’s like any major at Cornell: you take so many classes outside of the major as well, [and] you become a very well-rounded person, and I really wanted that.

Sun: You work on designs here, so what’s your communication like with the seamstresses in Peru?

C.O.: In the past I’ve always had to be there, for anything to get done in terms of my vision. And that’s crucial — the designer always has to be there to make sure [that] they’re understanding and translating your design into a reality that is exactly what you’ve envisioned it to be. And I think that’s the way it’s going to be. But we definitely want to train someone in production, that’s our goal when we travel to Peru in August. We want to train someone so that we have all the samples made and all the designs are done, but when we come to the United States to start launching and selling, we can say, “We want this many of that, this many of that,” and someone who is going to be an expert in production can carry it out. But in terms of design and getting the samples done, I have to and I want to be there.

Sun: How many people are on your staff?

C.O.: I have two seamstresses, but they hire about three people each from what I pay them, so it’s almost like a tree system. I have one tailor and one accessory maker, but [they each] have whole workshops that work for them.

Sun: Are they working exclusively for you?
C.O.: That’s the thing. Right now, they just do whatever they get. But what I want to do is to [give them] steady employment. Right now they get spurts of jobs … My dream has always been to help Peru become more of a developed country — less poverty, more jobs.

Sun: Can you talk more about the social aspect of your project?

C.O.: We use low-impact textiles. We pay our workers more than a fair wage.

Sun: What is that wage?

C.O.: It’s their asking price. Basically, a seamstress will get paid [about] 50 soles a day, and that’s an extremely good wage. But in the future, if they’re going to work for my brand, we won’t pay them by wage, we’ll pay them by salary, and they’ll have social security, they’ll have benefits. That’s what I want.

Sun: Has there been any trouble with competitors?

C.O.: I don’t have any competition in terms of what I do now, [which is] custom-made clothing for professional women over 40 … The expertise of Peruvians is truly made to measure, meaning making clothes for a specific body type, with specific measurements. I want to take advantage of that expertise and make it into a successful business.

Sun: Do you think the economic climate will hurt your plans?

C.O.: I think that a real entrepreneur cannot care about the macroeconomic situation. If you’re a real entrepreneur, you have to follow your passion.

_But spare change doesn’t hurt:_ Ontaneda has entered Bernales & Goretti in the Dell Social Innovation Competition, which awards $50,000 in start-up money to a student project that combines business savvy with social consciousness. Cast your vote at www.dellsocialinnovationcompetition.com.