



STEVE GRANITZ/WIREIMAGE

Tavi Gevinson, 15, has won the attention of big shots and ordinary girls.

Tavi's stylish star is growing brighter

With new website, teen is as Sassy as she wants to be

BY MEGAN TWOHEY
Tribune reporter

Tavi Gevinson wasted no time on the massive slice of chocolate cake with marshmallow and ice cream making its way from her fork to

her mouth. The 15-year-old had endured a grueling month, and not just because of the launch of her sophomore year of high school, with its demanding class schedule, awkward homecoming dance and other adolescent pressures.

A small girl with big ambition, she also had survived the launch of Rookie,

her online magazine for teenage girls, which already has generated millions of page views, close to 600,000 unique visits and multiple advertisers since going live on Labor Day.

The publication — and its immediate popularity — mark a major turning point for the Oak Park teen who burst onto the international fashion scene in 2009 with a

style blog penned from her suburban bedroom and a penchant for eccentric outfits, once likened to the look of a grandmother on Ecstasy.

When she started appearing in the front row of Fashion Week and rubbing shoulders with Gwen Stefani and other stars, naysay-

Please turn to Page 12

ers predicted Tavi was a passing fad. But two years and one New Yorker profile later, she is more driven than ever.

As founder and editor-in-chief of Rookie (rookiemag.com), she now oversees dozens of staff writers, editors and photographers, as well as a host of famous contributors, such as film director Miranda July.

She juggles story assignments, editing and the pursuit of advertisers. Last week found her interviewing candidates for a managing editor position while putting the final touches on October's offerings.

All this happens in between the homework assignments, a cappella group practices and sleepovers that come with being a regular high school student. That suburban bedroom where she started blogging is her office.

"It requires a lot of brainpower," said Tavi, after a bite of cake at an Oak Park restaurant, her eyes, accented with catlike makeup, blurry from a recent cold. "But I am so excited to have a project like this. It's not just my wandering thoughts anymore. We really want to make a difference."

With three posts a day on subjects stretching from stickers to sex, and in keeping with a monthly theme, such as September's "Beginnings," Rookie seeks to help girls realistically navigate the joys and insecurities of the teenage years.

As Tavi and her fans see it, she is well-suited to steer such content. She jokes that she had, like, one friend in middle school. Having recently gone through puberty, she struggles with mainstream beauty standards, especially pronounced at high school dances. And, like many of her peers, she battles depression

Positive feedback is pouring in from around the world.

"I had been looking forward to Rookie for the longest while and now that it's finally here, I am ecstatic!" one reader wrote in a post on the magazine's website. "You've made my day (and days to come) infinitely brighter... Oh and did you get those telepathic thoughts I sent your way? Because my first year of high school starts this week and it's like you KNEW exactly what I needed to get through it."

Indie film actress and director July, who wrote a piece for Rookie about becoming a feminist in high school, was not surprised.

"From the beginning, it felt like a really special thing to be part of," she said.

It started for Tavi as an obsession with Sassy, a magazine from the 1990s that served as an edgy alternative to Seventeen. When she glimpsed issues of the former publication posted on a friend's blog, Tavi was enthralled.

Here were straightforward advice about sex, self-esteem and

school, fashion spreads with diverse girls and voices of tough cultural figures, such as rocker Courtney Love. It resonated, especially at a time when Tavi was undergoing puberty and a transition to high school.

Through her fashion blog, Style Rookie, she had gained a growing base of fans who were drawn to her sophisticated musings on the latest fashion trends and photos of herself dressed in cutting-edge outfits. But as her body transformed, she became self-conscious.

"Teenage girl insecurity hit last year," she said, with her dry delivery. "For a while, I didn't post pictures of myself."

caught the eye of Jane Pratt, founding editor of the publication.

In November, Pratt sent her an email saying it was time for another Sassy and that Tavi was the person to make it happen.

Thrilling idea. But how to execute it?

After several meetings in New York, Tavi decided against signing with a publishing company. She wanted to control business decisions, not just editorial content. To make that happen, her father took out a loan and set up Rookie LLC, a big step for her Oak Park family.

"By law, I had to be involved," explained Steve Gevinson, who never imagined being part of such an endeavor after retiring as a high school English teacher. "Tavi was too young to sign the contract."

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Tavi Gevinson, in her family's house in Oak Park, says frequent trips to New York help her appreciate her suburban home.

NUCCIO DI NUZZO/Tribune Photo

They received pep talks and practical advice from Ira Glass, host of NPR's "This American Life," who had learned about Tavi through his wife and fellow journalist, Anaheed Alani.

Glass lent out an assistant to Rookie. Alani signed on as a full-time editor.

"I love Tavi, I love her blog and I love teenage girls," said Alani, who works on Rookie around the clock from her apartment in New York. "It was just obviously an exciting project to be involved with."

Other followers of Tavi's blog agreed. When she posted requests for submissions, thousands responded. It was a built-in network of talent.

The writers and photographers who were selected, a mix of teens and adults from around the world, were already working through blogs or other creative outlets.

Tavi channeled their talents into back-to-school photo spreads, interviews of musicians and practical advice on how to handle crushes on teachers.

Contributors, such as actors Jack Black and Zooey Deschanel, shared survival tips for high school and memories of first kisses.

While Rookie draws inspiration from Sassy, it does not attempt to re-create it.

Tavi said she does not want to push readers in or out of the mainstream, especially as she increasingly feels the tug of both sides. High school has found her shedding her trademark clear-framed glasses and cutting back on outlandish outfits. At the same

time, she's become more political, marching against slut-shaming and other attitudes that lead to sexual assault.

Instead, the goal of Rookie is honest, empowering content that will appeal to a variety of teens.

"While there's always danger in generalizing a whole group of people, I do think some experiences are somewhat universal to being a teenager, specifically a female one," she wrote in an editor's note that accompanied the launch of the website. "Rookie is a place to make the best of the beautiful pain and cringe-worthy awkwardness of being an adolescent girl. When it becomes harder to appreciate these things, we also have good plain fun and visual pleasure. When you're sick of having to be happy all the time, we have lots of eye-rolling rants, too."

The work that goes into Rookie would be demanding even if it weren't sandwiched in between homework, but Tavi is fueled by passion, and the writing and editing help tame her depression.

It requires trips to New York and LA, but Tavi is always happy to return to Oak Park and her high school, where she earns almost straight A's. She is devoted to her women's studies class and now enjoys a wider circle of friends.

"A lot of kids hate the suburbs, and if I didn't escape to New York, I might too," Tavi said. "But the travel has given me an appreciation for my friends' houses and the aesthetic of Oak Park. It's a really nice balance."

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