

Campus Couture Fashion Show Feature Story

The 30th annual Campus Couture Fashion Show took place this past Friday. This program is a massive collaboration of roughly 300 fashion merchandising and design students at California State University, Long Beach.

As I took my seat in the Carpenter Performing Arts Center, the room was filled with a constant chatter of anticipation from friends and family of the student designers.

"Do you know what her clothes even look like?" one father asked his wife.

"She wouldn't let anyone see them! I just know we bought like yards and yards of this sparkly thing a few months ago."

The overlapping voices of the audience were slowly replaced with an electronic beat, bouncing off the walls with an echo.

Out of the darkness of the stage walked a model wearing a bohemian wedding dress. The translucent white chiffon floated around her, a bubble of gauze ebbing and flowing with each step.

The room fell silent. Every child, parent, grandparent, and supporting friend held their mouth open in awe. Not a single word would distract this audience from the captivating magic of a well-designed dress.

This magical moment was just a flicker of a few seconds for this audience, but it was the culmination of an entire semester's work for the student designers. The program as a whole – the venue, guests, industry judges, sponsors, choreography, graphics, models, and volunteers – was the creation of a six-person student coordination team that began working as soon as the last show ended. According to this year's design liaison, Rachelle Pila, these coordinators personally worked anywhere between nine and 30 hours per week on planning the fashion show.

The designs that walked down the stage that night were not only laboriously crafted, but they were thoughtfully designed as well. Many of the students had personal messages that they wanted to convey through their work.

Designer Christal Cotton, 21, dedicated her award-winning collection of white and red statement pieces to her close friend and fellow CSULB student Estephan Hernandez, who lost his life to gun violence.

"My collection was created around a dress with a target to symbolize the constant target that minorities face from police and gang violence," Cotton says. "I wanted Estephan to be the center of my collection, I wanted it to be as if he was still with me."

Another designer, Daniel Flores, 22, used his collection of flouncing, shimmery dresses to portray Mexican culture. He says, "This collection is inspired by the beauty that Mexican women bring with their hearts of gold, their passion to love, and their fierceness to fight back against machismo."

Flores sees his designs as a means of empowering women who have "bloomed in the toughest conditions." He says, "I want them to see the beauty in their feminine strength. This world is theirs for the taking."

It is a vulnerable and nerve-racking moment for student designers to showcase their collection for an audience. As one alumni says, "You never know how the audience will react to it." But every designer noted that watching their designs finally go down the runway was a moment of pure joy.

Flores said, "I was so emotional knowing my family was going to come and see my collection and I was just so proud of my garments. It's almost like showing off your kid's trophies."

The Campus Couture Fashion Show is a hub of immense collaboration between the students on our campus and industry professionals. Many alumni also return to share their wisdom and help run the show. Analyssa Benedict, owner of management and production firm Revolt Society, helped the coordinators produce the show and work through rehearsals.

Nicole Azevedo, associate designer of sustainable denim brand, Boyish Jeans, has actually been returning to the FMD program all year long.

Her company was able to teach students about ethical and sustainable denim practices and how denim can be used to translate runway trends. Boyish Jeans also donated "over 50 rolls of denim" to the senior apparel design class.

She says, "It was really lovely to see how students implemented the advice we gave them into their designs. I was a student once so I know how valuable it is to the students to come back as an alumna and share knowledge and opportunities."

This fashion show creates such a valuable occasion for student designers to practice creating a cohesive collection, use their designs to portray a message, and connect to companies in the industry who can offer them a job after graduation. Unlike other fashion programs across the nation, Campus Couture does not require a competition or financial burden for students who would like to present their designs. It's a fundamental marker of the FMD program's ability to create open opportunities for their students and help them build careers, not just degrees.

The success of the entire show is a pinnacle of innovation from the minds of the students that create it. It is their time, passion, and story that speaks to the audience through their designs.

As Azevedo said, "The show is what the students make it. That's where the magic happens!"