

United Colors of Fashion Empowers Youth Around the World

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by Pamela Grossman



Immigrating to the U.S. from Haiti as a teen in 1996, Ciano Clerjuste was eager to explore the worlds of dance and fashion. He ended up doing so even when faced with huge obstacles—and the process of surmounting them inspired him to add “philanthropy” to his list of goals.



Tragedy struck the Clerjuste family soon after their arrival in the States. Ciano’s mother was paralyzed in a car accident, and his father died suddenly a few months later. Ciano got an undergraduate degree in business administration and management, in order to help his family financially; but he did not give up on his artistic dreams. He trained as a dancer, at the Alvin Ailey School among

others; and in 2010 he founded the United Colors of Fashion, with an organizational goal of “empowering youth through fashion.”

The not-for-profit is as multifaceted as Clerjuste himself. Domestically, it helps underserved youth to receive hands-on training and mentorship within the fashion industry, connecting them with designers, internships, stylists, producers, and publicists to help them move ahead in the field. Internationally, the organization works in South Africa with children who lack access to adequate medical care—especially those facing HIV/AIDS, sickle cell anemia, and paralysis. In March of 2013, UCoF representatives traveled to Soweto and delivered clothing, food, educational toys, and needed hygiene items (with the added bonus of a joyful party) to children of the Mapetla Day Care Center. “It’s very challenging,” Clerjuste admits of his organization’s broad scope—“and I have a full-time job in addition! But we have partners and help with our work domestically and internationally.” Funding for the international trips is provided in part by auctions of high-end fashion items in the States and the organization’s yearly gala, which this year took place in Manhattan’s Lexington Avenue Armory on October 9th—and for which Clerjuste used vacation time from his day job to prepare.

The gala, like the organization, was vibrant, joyful, and inclusive. “I wanted no lines” for admission, says Clerjuste—in contrast to the daunting waits and unfriendly door processes of many fashion events. And he got his wish; the entry process was blissfully free of attitude. Also in contrast to other similar events, he didn’t want to put himself at the center of things. “I didn’t want to talk much,” he says, instead letting the presentations speak for themselves.



These included: A Lifetime Achievement Award to African American model Pat Cleveland (“We’re all dreamers here—and dreams do come true!” she exclaimed); a poetic and well-crafted debut collection from Sade Solomon, a three-year UCoF intern and the organization’s Achiever of the Year (“I was really inspired by the youth of South Africa,” she says, basing her collection on the ocean because the children she met in landlocked Soweto expressed a yearning to see it); gorgeous presentations from international design lines including Marc Bouwer, Naked Ape, Carmen Marc Valvo, Kosibah, Ron n Ron, David Tlale, and Sukeina; and a finale that incorporated dance, fashion, and music. From the truly elegant sparkle of Bouwer’s evening gowns to the natty menswear of Naked Ape to Kosibah’s fanciful wedding dresses, there was something for everyone and creativity abounding. One exciting discovery was the up-and-coming

Sukeina line, helmed by Omar Salam of Dakar and delivering intricate prints that commanded attention. All of the designers presented are involved personally with UCoF's mission.



Bronx native Solomon was thrilled at this chance to show her work. “United Colors of Fashion is an amazing organization,” she says. “Ciano especially has encouraged me in ways I could not imagine. I’m extremely blessed and honored by the opportunities afforded to me through UCoF—this organization has the potential to make a huge impact in the fashion and philanthropy worlds.”

A centralized space where young designers who would otherwise not be able to afford them can access showrooms, sewing classes, and more is part of the organization's 10-year plan. “There’s can be a lot of fighting and competition” in fashion, says Clerjuste, who hopes to introduce a more collaborative vibe—while giving unforeseen chances in life to youth in the States and abroad. The teenager who faced tragedy has become a man adamant about giving. “Every day is a struggle,” he says, “so we must be kind to one another.”