

NEWS

'It's who we are': Fashion show takes center stage at Concord Multicultural Festival



by Catherine McLaughlin

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Grace Kindeke models in the fashion show at the 2025 Concord Multicultural Festival. Credit: CATHERINE McLAUGHLIN / Monitor staff

Until Sunday, Nadia Raffia had never seen her garments on the runway.

The upstart fashion designer's pieces are inspired by her background in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Raffia, 27, has been styling and making clothes for her entire life, but she began pursuing it professionally a year ago.

"I felt like I'm going somewhere," she said of the fashion show at Sunday's Multicultural Festival in Concord. "That's what it felt like, like I'm going somewhere, like there's a future."

Alongside musicians, singers and dancers, Raffia's creations took center stage. The show was produced by Emelyne Niyoyandemye, a Manchester resident who has used her background as a model and connections in the fashion industry to support designers, models and other artists at events and fundraisers across New England.



Nadia Raffia (center) hears the applause with the other members of the fashion show at the Multicultural Festival on Sunday, September 21, 2025.

Niyoyandemye, who also uses the last name Adios, **fell in love with fashion** as a child in Burundi. She and her siblings stood heads taller than many of their peers, and were bullied for it, she said.

“I thought there was something wrong with me, because I was too tall,” said Niyoyandemye, who stands one inch above six feet. Modeling changed everything. Four of the eight children in her family have worked in the fashion industry.

She continued modeling as she went to college for communications in Uganda, hoping to one day become a broadcast journalist. While already speaking four languages, she moved to the United States in 2014 with a goal of mastering English and getting a foothold in her career. Things didn’t go as planned.

Where Niyoyandemye started, in Ohio, she found little community and struggled to get rooted. Within months, she’d moved to Concord, staying with a family friend of her father, and made plans to move to Maine with a friend from college.

Those plans never materialized because she loved Concord too much. Learning English through Second Start and forming a close bond with Judy and Arnie Alpert of Canterbury, New Hampshire’s capital city became home. She went to NHTI and SNHU, and pursued work in psychology, healthcare and language interpretation.



Credit: CATHERINE McLAUGHLIN / Monitor staff

Her love for fashion – and her modeling contracts – were never lost. Friends and agents connected her with other stylists, designers and models in the United States.

It was at a fundraiser for children in Burundi that Eric Tuyishimire met Emelyne. Tuyishimire had been trying to make it as a model in Rwanda before he fled the violence of the M23 rebellion, receiving asylum and settling in South Portland, Maine.

Today he is a chef, but models anytime Niyoyandemye calls him up to ask. For the 38-year-old, fashion is a source of both joy and freedom.

“To come here, even if I don’t make money out of it, doing those things they used to not let me do, it’s like freedom,” he said. “It’s like therapy.”

“Fashion,” Niyoyandemye said, “is not what we put on. It’s who we are.”

Models in Sunday’s show put that on full display, smiling, dancing, and gliding through the crowd at Keach Park before striding across the stage. Young dancers and attendees at the festival wearing outfits significant to their culture were encouraged to join – and did.

Raffia and Niyoyandemye met while studying together at NHTI. When Raffia started her own business, Niyoyandemye was eager to support her.

The theme of Sunday’s show was a celebration of diversity.

As she looks to the future, hoping to expand her brand and work with individual clients, Raffia said the exposure and community offered by the festival meant a lot.



“It opens your mind to how big the world is, how beautiful our cultures around the world are,” she said. “Especially in a state like New Hampshire, we need more events like this.”

In last few months, Niyoyandemye said she’s seen fellow immigrants or refugees in her community trying to blend in: to mute their accents, to not stand out.

The vibrant pieces of the show and its celebratory theme were intentional.

“In this time we can still love ourselves, celebrate who we are,” she said. “We’re going to dance in this rain.”