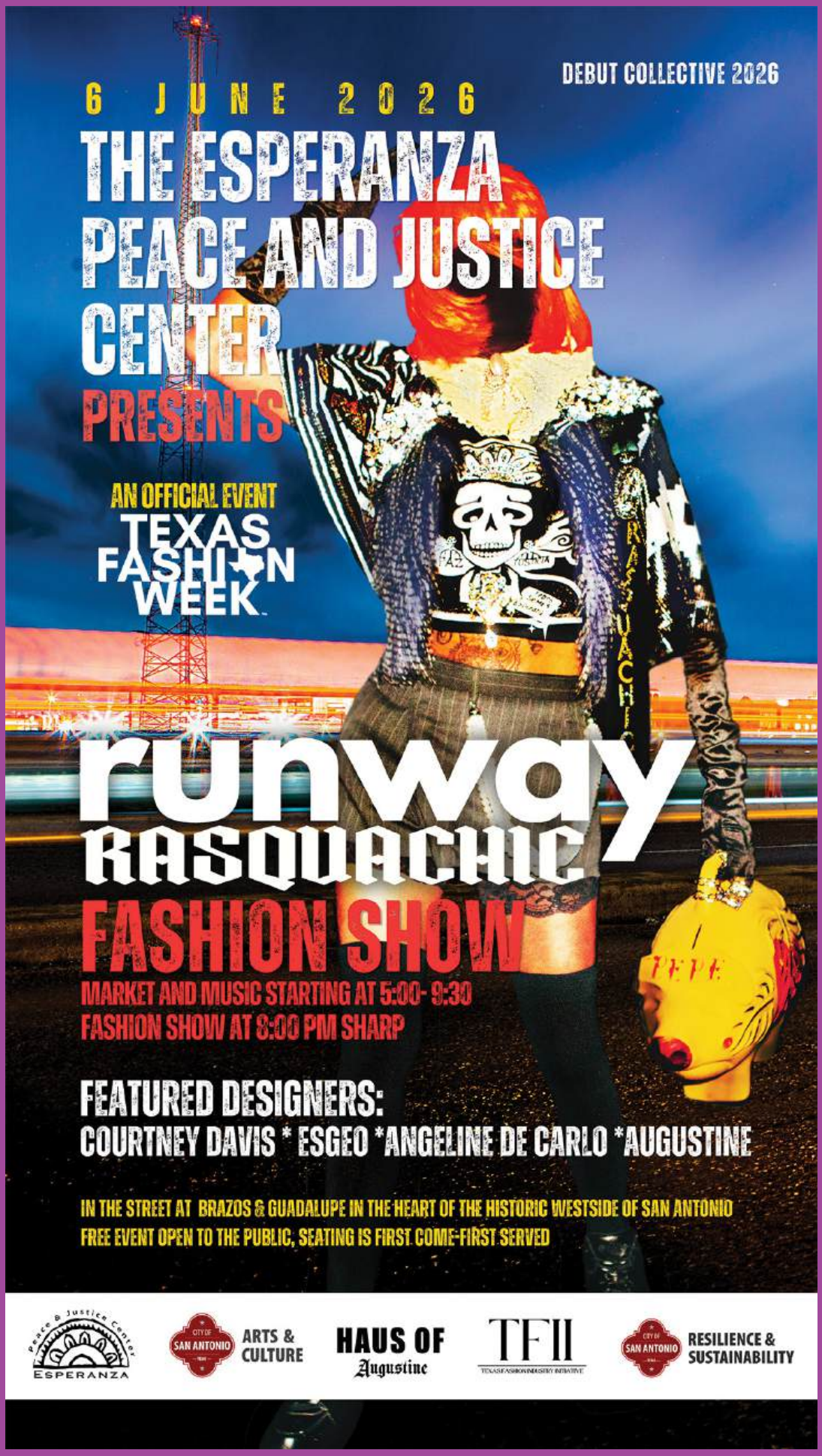


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# Fashion, Virginia y Más

Dr. Puente Para La Gente

My love for fashion is something I attribute to my grandmother, Virginia, a deeply creative woman whose influence continues to shape me. Some of my favorite memories are of being at her house—the smell of homemade flour tortillas filling the kitchen while I sat searching through her sewing bins. She knew how to knit, crochet and sew and her sewing machine—built into a desk and surrounded by bobbins, thimbles, and scraps—felt almost sacred to me as a child. As she grew older and came to live with us, I watched her continue to make something out of nothing. One of my fondest memories is of these little flowers she made out of toilet paper, where she used the discarded roll as a vase to decorate her room—a memory I still pay homage to in my work as a creative.







Pictured are Grandma Virginia, Juanita Hernández Ramón (whose photo is part of *Fotohistorias del Westside*) and the dress of Beatriz Llamas, *La Paloma del Norte,* a member of *Las Tesoros de San Antonio* featured in the *Museo del Westside* of the *Esperanza Peace & Justice Center.* All mentioned in the article for their fashion sensibilities, creativity and influence on Dr. Puente Para La Gente

In my family, clothing was always passed down, which meant there was always something that needed repair or alteration. Alongside that was the constant reality of trying to make ends meet with limited resources. Dr. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto states in his 1989 essay—*Rasquachismo*, the sensibility of being *rasquache* is like "*making a silk purse from a sow's ear."* For me, in fashion, it goes deeper than the practice of just making do; it demonstrates how that sensibility has always been present in the care for our communities. Fashion is not absent among those with limited means; it simply moves in ways that modern fashion has often failed to recognize. Within working-class and marginalized communities, fashion exists through adaptation, repair, reuse, inheritance, and ingenuity. It's shaped not by excess, but by resourcefulness. In reality, it is a deeply creative and culturally informed practice that challenges conventional ideas of value, luxury, and style. In modern fashion, what begins in the margins is now repeatedly absorbed, repackaged, and celebrated by the very industries that once overlooked it

I recall a story Dr. Ybarra-Frausto shared about his tías who lived in San Antonio's Westside. He described how they always looked glamorous—dressed beautifully and carrying themselves with elegance—despite having modest means. Their style was not dependent on wealth, but on creativity and pride. That story stayed with me because it reflects an irony I witness daily, our communities are the most influential, continuously shaping mainstream fashion through innovation yet, are undervalued.

During my time working for the *Esperanza Peace & Justice Center*, I became fascinated by the photos of Westside residents walking the streets of downtown San Antonio that were ultimately displayed on the streets as part of the project, *Fotohistorias del Westside*. As I learned about the city's history through this project, I was told that many of those images had been taken on Houston Street. I also remember elders at the *Second Saturday Convivios* speaking about the photo studios that once lined Houston Street. For a small fee, photographers would take your picture and later you could pick up the developed images at the studio. This practice flourished because Houston Street in the 1940s and 1950s was vibrant. Going downtown was an occasion for which people dressed up. Even those with modest means took pride in their appearance, understanding fashion as part of their dignity. These many photos now serve as important visual records, revealing how style, self-fashioning and cultural expression were always present in everyday life in San Antonio.

That brings me to another point about why our elders looked so sharp in these photos, which Dr. Ybarra-Frausto discussed in an oral history. During that time, many Westside residents had their clothing altered from secondhand or hand-me-down garments or

custom-made by local seamstresses to fit their bodies. Gente may have owned only a handful of dresses or suits but those garments fit beautifully and were treated with care and pride. Dr. Frausto remarked that seamstresses could be found throughout the Westside. Families invested what they could into quality fabrics and craftsmanship because a new dress or suit was a rare luxury, and expected to last for years rather than a single fashion trend or season. In contrast to today's endless cycle of disposable fast fashion, this slower approach to clothing production created garments that endured—passed from tía to tía, prima to prima, and preserved across generations. And to think that many of our elders were, in essence, wearing custom couture. They selected sewing patterns, hand-picked fabrics, and worked with seamstresses to create garments made specifically for their bodies and lives. As these pieces were passed down, each new wearer altered, repaired, or restyled them. Fashion became an intergenerational conversation shaped through care, adaptation, and personal expression. Ironically, what was once a necessity in working-class communities has now become a contemporary luxury: clothing tailored, altered, or custom-made to fit one's body.



Kristel Puente, the author, at her high school prom wearing a dress expertly made by her Tía Fina.

Another example of this creative resilience I recall is from a *Fotohistorias* banner featuring Juanita Hernández Ramón, shown wearing a blouse embroidered with bright fuchsia flowers. Part of the caption reads: "Juanita Hernández Ramón was born in Rosita, Mexico and came to the U.S. at age nine… Juanita was also a sharecropper who picked cotton, corn, and beans. Juanita used to embroider all her own blouses and loved to garden." What moves me is that we are able to witness a small piece of Juanita through her work—perhaps even seeing the very embroidery stitched by her own hands. There is another example of this sensibility in the fashion of *Las Tesoros de San Antonio*, as showcased in The *Museo del Westside*. Through their elegance and presentation, we are reminded that the gente of the Westside have always shone. Whether in carefully embroidered blouses or fully sequined gowns, fashion existed as a form of joy, dignity, glamour, and cultural pride regardless of circumstance.

Lastly, I want to share a kind of love letter to tía seamstresses everywhere. When it came time for my high school prom, we simply did not have the money for a dress. While many of my friends were excitedly planning trips to *Dillard's* or *Foley's,* I knew I didn't have *Jessica McClintock* money. My Tía Fina graciously offered to make my dress, just as she had once made my mother's wedding dress when my family could not afford a store-bought one. She asked me to find an image and choose a sewing pattern, which proved difficult because what I wanted was not fashionable at the time. I dreamed of something sleek and fitted, inspired by the elegance of Ginger Rogers. But if you remember the 1990s, most formal dresses were filled with ruffles, puffed sleeves, and excess fabric. My mother and I went shopping for material, carefully selecting the fabric that would bring my dream dress to life. I loved that dress, and still have it! It was made specifically for me—cut to my body, and sewn with care by someone who loved me. Yet at the time, I remember feeling embarrassed when people asked where I bought it because I could not answer with the name of a designer or department store. Looking back, I realize the irony: while others wore mass-produced dresses, I was wearing something entirely unique, handmade, and deeply personal. Knowing everything I have learned in my years of loving fashion, in every way possible, I was the richest girl at my prom.

Through mending, altering, reusing, embroidering, and passing garments down across generations, our elders created systems of care through creativity long before sustainability became trendy industry language. I know for a fact that every part of San Anto has those tías who served as our saints and saviors—women who, on top of their already demanding work as seamstresses, still found the time to make a new suit for a graduation, a dress for prom, or a communion outfit for someone in need. Looking back, I realize that my grandmother and many tías, seamstresses, and elders of the Westside were teaching us something far greater than how to dress—they were teaching us not only how to care for one another but how to care for our planet. What began as a necessity evolved into a sharpened sensibility—a way of seeing value, beauty, and possibility where others might not. Very very chic, or as I would say now, *Rasquachic*. See you at the runway!

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BIO: *Dr. Puente Para La Gente is a community historian and curator who intersects work in the community with work as a* rasquache *scholar activist building bridges between those who produce knowledge and the community that are the source of that knowledge. Their research interests include San Antonio cultural bearers and artists, activism, the Borderlands, fashion,* Rasquachismo *and the arts.*

# Runway Rasquachic, the beginnings

By Agosto Cuellar

The year was 2007. *Jive Refried,* my store and art gallery, exploded on the *First Friday* scene in *Southtown*. In 1999 we were celebrating life and cultural happenings inside a vintage installation space across *Rosario's*—the place to eat and be seen in San Antonio. A hop and a skip from that energy of belonging, was exactly what *Jive Refried* offered clients—a creative outlet and a safe space to be yourself. It became a cultural phenomenon that existed in a way that could be felt, seen and experienced. Even now many creatives tell me that they shopped or hung out at *Jive* as teenagers.





Local fashion *rasquachic* designer, Agosto Cuellar, (pictured on the runway with Kristel Puente) was initially influenced by friend and mentor, Pilar Correa, now deceased but long remembered for her unique fashion sense.

When I began running *Jive*, a fashion revolution was gaining traction in SA. We coordinated fashion events and a runway show with local designers, photographers, makeup artists and models. We were all working to build a creative community of fashionistas. We did *Luminaria's Art of Fashion* and other events like the *WEBB Party* and caught the attention of festival producers, in particular, an event in the Westside called *"Una Noche En La Gloria"* —a spin-off of *Luminaria* that addressed the lack of latinx and other people of color in their event. Organizers reached out to me to help gather designers, hair and makeup artists—and to run the logistics of a fashion show on the streets of the historic Westside of San Antonio. The first runway show was in 2008 and thus began a ten-year run of *Runway En La Calle*, a name I coined for my production of the fashion show element of this event.

I have many wonderful memories of that time that still bring me joy. One is of an image I have where community was seated next to buyers from *Nieman Marcus*—a premiere Texas retailer. I also remember a beautiful image of an *abuelita* from *Alazan* sitting next to a buyer from *Saks Fifth Avenue*. These illustrated to me the way that fashion connects people and how it's so important. Over the years so many community members and artists have participated or attended events supporting the growing fashion community that I've been blessed to help grow. Of the many things I've done it has been working directly with the community bringing people to fashion as much as fashion to the people that's been most rewarding. Whether it's the models' careers we helped launch, or the designers that continue to work in the industry, or the hair and makeup creatives that have gone on to success—I feel a commitment to all that are looking for opportunities and I will help them, if I can.

That is why *Runway Rasquachic* is so important to me. *Rasquachic* is a term, close to my heart, inspired by my dear early mentor, Pilar Correa, who described her vintage style and stylings as not *rasquache*, but *rasquachic*. My *Rasquachic 2017 Collection* was also special to me because it was the second collaboration with Dr. Puente Para La Gente working as creative director. Her personal connection to *rasquchismo* came through her grandmother influencing her own creative and academic journey. It is very fitting that upon reimagining all I have accomplished and all that we have done together in the name of *rasquachismo* and the Westside of San Antonio—that we name this event *Runway Rasquachic*. I am also thrilled to announce that our creative collective *Haus of Augustine* is debuting two new designers and many other creatives. We are excited to show you all our creative labor of love that will continue to have many more exciting announcements and collaborations to come. The time is now, and it's time to celebrate fashion street style, like only we can. *Nos vemos en la calle.* ¡*Adelante!*

BIO: *Agosto's career started as a young artist on San Antonio's Westside. His fashion fame soared as owner of* Jive Refried *from 1999-2011. It was featured in* Elle Magazine *in 2005 and in 2018, he was awarded the* San Antonio Fashion Awards Cultural Pioneer Award. *A founder and producer of* Runway En La Calle *for 10 years, Agosto's personal collection,* Barrio Folk Baroque, *was showcased in* New York *and* Paris Fashion Weeks *and at* San Antonio's Fashion Week. *Agosto now owns* ***Augustine Atelier,*** *named after his grandfather, at the* Blue Star Complex.