

Sewing together a new future

*Stripes and prints illuminated by runway lights met a wave of applause as the birth of clothing label MOJALIVIN was welcomed. **DUNJA KARAGIC** reports*





The inspiring story behind the beautifully tailored garments at the show is one of a determined 19-year-old who now lives in Brisbane, Australia. But his smile and pride as all the planning pays off disguises a childhood tainted by memories of injustice and hardship.

Salomon Janvier Lukonga took his first steps on the red dirt of Nyarungusu Refugee Camp following his parent's harrowing escape from the Congo Civil War in 1996. Nyarungusu, in the western Tanzanian province of Kigoma, houses about 150,000 people. It was opened in 1996 by the UNHCR and the Tanzanian Government to help Congolese refugees fleeing genocidal rampages, the mass shelters don't offer its ever-increasing population

a life of comfort and security.

As one of the largest refugee camps in the world, medicine, housing and other resources are often scarce, leaving those within its borders in a perpetual battle with thirst, hunger, fatigue and sickness. Common diseases easily cured in other parts of the world are a significant cause of death because of the difficulty in obtaining clean water, food and comfortable places for people to sleep.

Salomon recalls small childhood moments such as travelling far away with his friends to play soccer – a temporary reprieve from the arduous camp life. Then there are the memories of finishing school strained with hunger, only to be greeted with an empty dinner plate, arousing feelings caused by a deprivation of basic human rights foreign to many of those lucky enough to be living



in countries untainted by war and injustice.

In 2011 Salomon and his family were given the opportunity to leave camp and arrived in Australia to welcome a fresh start. Overwhelmed by opportunities, Salomon soon envisioned a purpose born of the enduring pain of knowing about the struggles that thousands continued to experience in Nyarungusu and around the world. Combined with the opportunities offered in Australia, they instilled in him a determination to give back to those in need.

At 17 he envisaged using his passion for fashion design to help fulfil this desire, culminating in the creation of his clothing label, MOJALIVIN – from which 30 percent of profits go to provide medical supplies to the Republic of Congo.

After more than two years, at 19 he has launched a collection and organised his first runway show, all funded through his own hard work, dedicating every spare dollar earned to creating the label and using a GoFundMe page created in during his final year of high school, he grasped every opportunity to realise his dream.

“Knowing the fact that I’m alive is a blessing, everything I do now has to be not only for me but for the people,” Salomon says. “I am really passionate about people in need because I was once that boy with nothing. So I think life without helping the ones who are less fortunate is not really a life, it is not really living.”

Currently building MOJALIVIN’s website, he hopes to go back to the Congo to film his experience, to help others understand the struggles that not only tainted his childhood but the lives of thousands of others.

“It’s so easy to come and just settle and pick up on the ways here,” Salomon says. “There is nothing wrong with that, but I think going back there and showing people how it is will help them be more grateful for themselves being here and what we do here.”

Salomon’s personal story and sentiments are imprinted upon his creative designs. Abundant black-and-white stripes symbolise a closing of the gap between those privileged and those in need, while recurring vertical designs symbolise the strength to stand strong for what we believe in – “because we die when we choose to be quiet about the things that matter,” he says.

“The way I see black and white is more than just colour. What I was portraying here was the rich and the poor, people with a lot of opportunity in Western countries mostly and people in Third World countries who are continuously struggling, and to put the two together. Black-and-white pretty much closes the gap between the two. That was my whole message, closing the gap between the less fortunate and the more fortunate. It portrays the message behind the brand: “look good while making a difference”.

Salomon wants MOJALIVIN to be known around Australia and globally. Now he is brainstorming ideas aimed at creating two collections and two shows. But most importantly he wants to keep inspiring as many young people around him as possible. “I believe that if there are youth who are creating businesses that are there to help people in need, the future will be nothing but amazing. So my dream is to inspire as many young people as I can for a better future.”

So MOJALIVIN is much more than an array of creatively crafted pieces: it is a social statement of struggle, determination and the enduring importance of giving back to our communities. R