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Young Providence fashion designer learned a lot from his mother's work

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — After a night of hard slam dancing in a mosh pit, then 18-year-old Joshua Rodriguez felt a breeze at the inseam of his jeans. A pattern for bicyclers and active wear became his saving grace, and his first stitch.

"I really liked those jeans," the budding fashion designer, now 21, said in retrospect Wednesday.

In fact, Rodriguez said he grows a relationship with all his clothes. He knows exactly where he inherited the passion from.

A lack of money and an affinity to experiment led Rodriguez's mother, Betania Rodriguez, to make skirts out of large, bleached rice bags as a child in the Dominican Republic. That ingenuity continued in the United States as she revived old furniture. The wood-trimmed sofa upholstered in tangelo fabric and striped chairs in the living room are some of her creations.

"I would come home from school and see her hand sewing the couches, and I kind of took that interest," he said, sitting next to his smiling mother.

By middle school, he was having a tailor alter and re-hem the clothes he bought. The changes sometimes cost him \$60 for two pairs of jeans, so he figured, why not do it himself? Mentors at New Urban Arts, the Westminster Street community arts studio for high school students and emerging artists, became his sounding board and teachers for furthering his craft — particularly with sewing.

A military jacket embellished with art inspired by the late artist Keith Haring, a square of cow print fabric and "pow" and other comic book sounds is one of his earlier pieces. A newer piece, the T-shirt he was wearing, is a tribute to another artist he admires — the late Andy Warhol. The olive T-shirt has a screen-print of a New York Daily News front page with the headline, "Actress shoots Andy Warhol."

"I like doing things of my own," he said while stating he has had nothing but support from others. "It just felt good. I was like, 'I did this.' "

Rodriguez also found like-peers at New Urban Arts: Nelson Paredes, Nelvis Severino and another Providence resident who simply goes by Paris, and they started a clothing line called Couture13 two years ago — the year Rodriguez graduated from Hope High School.

The four designers put together and paid for an inclusive art show displaying their clothing and the works of other local young artists of multiple forms — including music, graphic artwork, photographs and paintings — Thursday from 5 to 10 p.m. at AS220's Black Box Theater, 95 Empire St.

Rodriguez describes Couture13 as urban street wear, but they may be moving to more high-end pieces soon with more expensive prints, details and fabrics. He is currently taking art and other classes at the Community College of Rhode Island to further discover his capabilities.

"I love his work," said Daniel Schleifer, New Urban Arts interim executive director. "It connects all these different styles from punk to hip hop and I love the way that it is crafty and DIY (do it yourself). It brings all those elements together, and they're comfortable and fresh."

"Rhode Island has a great art scene," Rodriguez said. "It needs its credit, and I want to be part of that. We're working hard."

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Joshua Rodriguez, a young fashion designer, says he has a relationship with his clothes. He's shown with his mother, Betania, in their living room in Providence. A college student, he has been altering and making his clothes since middle school. He learned to sew while watching his mother reupholster sofas. The Providence Journal/Bob Thayer