



NEWS

Tierra del Sol was launched by parents in 1971, an alternative to institutional care for children

Many with developmental disabilities become artists, others aim for volunteerism and employment



Fashion designer and artist Aracely Ellis, 39, shows one of her weavings at Tierra del Sol, a vocational training organization for the developmentally disabled, in Sunland on Friday, Sept. 19, 2025. Her work was in the organization's inaugural fashion show. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)



By **MARIANNE LOVE**

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For more than a year, Aracely Ellis has been focused on designing and creating hand-sewn flowing formal gowns and hip streetwear that was highlighted Sept. 27 at an inaugural fashion show in West Hollywood along with seven peers — peers who share a developmental disability diagnosis, just like Ellis.

She studies at the sprawling 7.5-acre Sunland campus of [Tierra del Sol, a nonprofit conceived by parents](#) in 1971 who were determined not to abandon their children to the state — children who had developmental disabilities such as autism, epilepsy, and cerebral palsy.

The fashion show was organized by Tierra del Sol, and Ellis and her artist peers attended, along with about 800 other students in various disciplines.

Ellis' eight-piece set featured her favorite colors of pink, purple and mulberry — although the one-of-a-kind gown she flaunted that afternoon was made from red velvet material with hand-drawn hearts that represented love, spirit, beauty and grace.

She topped off her walkway creation with a pink belt-sash and a pink hair scrunchie. "This is a beautiful opportunity," said Ellis, a 39-year-old Chatsworth artist and fashion designer. "It's a dream come true."



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Joelle Deyo, project coordinator for careers in the arts at Tierra del Sol, speaks with fashion designer and artist Aracely Ellis, 39, at Tierra del Sol, a vocational training organization for the developmentally disabled, in Sunland on Friday, Sept. 19, 2025. Her work was in the organization's inaugural fashion show. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

For Ellis, movement is key to her designs, having been a dancer since she was eight. She professes “dancing is like dreaming with your feet.”

Her visual creations — turned mostly into flowing gowns — follow the exploration of movement and frequently depict ornate stages full of twirling ballerinas.

Ellis also has been learning to weave, which she incorporates into her free-flowing designs made from sketches depicting bust lines and various necessary measurements. Her goal is to publish a coffee table book of her works.

All Tierra del Sol artists' hand-crafted creations were walked down the runway in September by models during a live fashion show with a standing-only crowd at Fiesta Hall in Plummer Park that holds 200 people.

As with any fashion show, the models were followed by each creator who sauntered down the catwalk in all their glory in hopes of receiving the audience's standing ovation.

“Once at center stage, (Ellis') models joined her to a resounding round of applause from the audience,” said Rebecca Lienhard, chief operating officer at Tierra del Sol Foundation. “(It was) a brimming success.”

Tierra del Sol not only nurtures artists with developmental disabilities, it has also been successful in developing higher education through its College to Career, PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) and developing workforce models through volunteerism and paid employment.

Other Tierra del Sol locations include Upland with an art studio, and West Hollywood home to the Tierra del Sol Gallery. The organization also has workforce development programs in Van Nuys, and a thrift shop in Burbank.

Tierra del Sol's philosophy is simple: all people have a gift and communities are much richer when all citizens are valued for their contributions.

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