



Photos courtesy of Nicole Puzzo

Befree co-founder Nicole Puzzo (left) came up with the idea for adaptive pants after her daughter Stella (right) was in double leg casts for three months.

Accessible fashion takes the runway at RI Fashion Week

By **STELLA LORENCE**
slorence@woonsocketcall.com

PROVIDENCE – Models with disabilities wearing adaptive fashion will take to the runway at Rhode Island Fashion Week this year thanks to a partnership between modeling agency HumanKind and upstart clothing company Befree.

The models will be showcasing Befree’s flagship product, ZipOns, pants that have zippers going up the entire leg on both outer seams. The design makes the pants easier for people with mobility challenges or their caregivers to put on.

Nicole Puzzo developed the concept after her daughter Stella, who has cerebral palsy, underwent double hip surgery at age five. The



Stella Puzzo, age 14, will be modeling the adaptive ZipOns pants designed by her mother Nicole at this year’s Rhode Island Fashion Week show.

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Runway

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surgery left her in double leg casts held apart by a bar at her ankles, making dressing nearly impossible during the three-month recovery.

Puzzo said she knew Stella wouldn't be happy following her doctor's advice to dress in blankets or long t-shirts until the casts came off, so Puzzo took a pair of pajama pants and split them open on the outer seams, allowing her to wrap them around Stella's casts. She added Velcro to close them back up.

When Stella returned to the doctor for her post-operation appointment wearing the customized pants, her doctor told Puzzo that it was an "amazing" idea and encouraged her to share it with other parents. Puzzo tapped her long-time friend

Joanne DiCamillo and the duo launched Befree.

They spent years prototyping, piloting and consulting with other people with disabilities and medical experts before landing on the current design that uses zippers and moisture-wicking material. The pandemic "sidelined" the fledgling company but they launched their website in 2022 and have spent the last two years getting their name out there while preparing to expand their product offerings to shorts and leggings.

Puzzo said featuring ZipOns at RI Fashion Week will be a huge step toward that goal, and showcasing adaptive fashion and talent with disabilities more generally is a goal shared by Kristie Raymond, founder of HumanKind casting.

Raymond had decades of experience in casting before she launched HumanKind to focus specifically on rep-

resenting people with disabilities.

She said she's been working with RI Fashion Week for a few years "in the background" since launching HumanKind, but last year was the first year her talent had their own runway segment.

HumanKind can help break down barriers on two fronts, Raymond said. On one side, she is using her experience in the casting industry to specifically carve out a space for people with disabilities. On the other, events like RI Fashion Week that give others in the industry a chance to work with HumanKind's talent can help assuage any hesitations they may have about booking people with disabilities.

"Many photographers and hair and make-up people have never had an opportunity to work with people with disabilities," Raymond said. "Hopefully

there's a reverberation within the community overall."

Raymond met Puzzo and Stella, now 14, at a photo shoot a few months ago and decided to partner for this year's Fashion Week to showcase Befree's adaptive fashion.

"Adaptive fashion is fashion," Raymond said. "It's universal. This is universal fashion that is good for everyone."

Stella, who has modeled Befree apparel for the brand's website and appeared in a couple other fashion shows, will be one of 16 models participating in this year's segment. They will all wear branded t-shirts they are encouraged to customize or decorate on top and assigned Befree pants on the bottom, and Raymond will coach models who express interest on the runway walk.

For Puzzo, Rhode Island Fashion Week will be a

launch of both Befree and Stella, who has modeling aspirations.

"It's really truly something she enjoys," Puzzo said. "It's such a great confidence builder. Seeing her embrace it all is so amazing."

The segment will also be about countering the assumption that products designed specifically to be accessible only benefit people with disabilities. Overcoming that assumption is what will help lead to more options in adaptive fashion, Puzzo said.

"Our product might not work for some people but it might for others," Puzzo said. "We want to get to a place where I can take [Stella] to any store and there are options. I hope we get there. I see us getting there."

RI Fashion Week events run May 2-4 at Farm Fresh RI, and the HumanKind-Befree runway segment will

take place on Saturday, May 4 at noon. Tickets are available online at fashion-weekri.com.

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