TuSalud

HIV Research Walks the Runway at New York Fashion Week [SLIDESHOW]

For the U.S. debut of the HIV Unwrapped initiative, fashion designers created stylish looks inspired by HIV research projects.

September 18, 2025 By Trent Straube

Trend alert: HIV research is having a style moment. The global storytelling and awareness initiative HIV Unwrapped made its U.S. debut with a runway show held September 13 during New York Fashion Week.

For this project, HIV Unwrapped paired Parson School of Design students and recent alums with leading HIV scientists across the nation. After up-and-coming designers learned about the scientists' cutting-edge research, they were tasked with creating a look inspired by the science. Models and celebrities walked the resultant fashions down the runway Saturday in Tribeca at a stigma-fighting event that raised awareness and looked fierce.

"HIV Unwrapped isn't just serving looks—we're serving truth. This is where fashion collides with science to spark conversations that matter," host and advocate Karl Schmid told the crowd before the show, according to Gay City News. "HIV doesn't discriminate, because despite all of the tools we have, stigma and fear still hold us back."

HIV Unwrapped was produced by +Life, a multimedia brand that fights HIV stigma and was founded by Schmid, a Hollywood journalist who in 2018 made national headlines when he disclosed on Instagram that he is living with HIV. The fashion event was presented with support from pharma giant Gilead Sciences, LGBTQ media advocacy group GLAAD, media company EqualPride and the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) and design mentorship from Tanner Fletcher, a Brooklyn-based fashion brand.



Javier Muñoz at HIV Unwrapped at New York Fashion Week 2025Courtesy of Plus Life Media

Among the models and guests were Javier Muñoz (the activist and Hamilton star who recently

protested HIV budget cuts in DC), Demetre Daskalakis (a former director at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who recently resigned in protest), Mary Gibson (singer), Art Bezrukavenko (content creator) Mila Jam (singer), John Friia (host, Taxi TV), Jay Valle (NBC OUT), Lionel Moise (ABC News), Mark Mackillop (Broadway Bares) and more. Also in the spotlight were several panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

One of the researcher-designer pairings included Deborah Persaud, MD, professor of pediatrics and director of the Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at Johns Hopkins Children's Center, and Asato Kitamura, who was born in Japan and earned his MFA from Parsons.

For the runway, Kitamura created a black gown with intricate hand-embroidered white embellishments that symbolized the daily act of taking HIV medication.

"I really think it's important for us to have open conversations between people in the fashion industry and in science," Persaud told Gay City News. "I think it's really important to spread that message of hope, that we've made a lot of progress with treatment."

Videos of the designer-researcher teams discussing their work were also projected. Many are posted online, such as these

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In another pairing, Ayinde Bradford a Princeton architecture graduate and current design student at Parsons, worked with Luis J. Montaner, DVM, DPhil, the executive vice president of The Wistar Institute who's also active with Philadelphia FIGHT and the BEAT-HIV Delaney Collaboratory. Montaner is originally from Puerto Rico, and Bradford's design nodded to ballroom icon Angie Xtravaganza, a Puerto Rican trans performer and founder of the House of Xtravaganza. Bradford's red jacket and cape included a yellow pattern inspired by tissue samples taken during a colonoscopy. (Such samples are often used in HIV research.)

"We loved getting to know this group of students and fellow designers, hearing about their designs, their personal stories and connecting over our shared fashion interests," the Tanner Fletcher team told CFDA. "On top of that, we enjoyed getting to know more about this organization and being a part of an inspiring project."

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The first iteration of HIV Unwrapped had fashion designers in Australia reimagine the lab coat to stunning effect, kicking off a global trend to put HIV research on the runway.

Don’t worry if you missed the show. The event will be broadcast as a +Life special on Hulu on November 30, a day ahead of World AIDS Day, marked each December 1.

The New York Fashion Week event took place amid extreme turmoil and budget cuts involving HIV research and support—notably a funding bill before Congress that slashes $2 billion from HIV programs. For background, click #Advoacy and #Budget Cuts.

It’s said that in fashion, one day you’re in and the next day you’re out. But when you’re in HIV research and advocacy, you’re what’s considered timeless.

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