

From Orphanage to the Runways of New York

The story of Fior Mendez is a living example of what can be achieved through willpower and resilience. In just six months, this 23-year old has gone from living at the Children of Christ Orphanage in La Romana to a promising career as a model in New York. Despite having spent such a short time in the world fashion capital, Fior has already debuted at New York Fashion Week in September with designer Nzinga Knight. In February the U.S. edition of Cosmopolitan magazine will publish a feature on her.

This dizzying sequence of events has greatly exceeded the self-taught Dominican model's expectations: "I still can't believe what's happening to me, it's so wonderful that I can't put it into words. To be on a catwalk here was like a dream," she told *The NEWS* in a phone call from New York.

Knight, also of Caribbean descent said "Fior was actually the first model I booked for the show after seeing over 50 models. My styles are very elegant and high fashion and she exuded an inherent grace in her walk and the expression on her face. She fit the clothes nicely and was so easy to work with." So fascinated was the designer with Fior that beginning in January she will be featured on her website wearing the same dress she modeled at NYFW, which Knight has affectionately named 'The Fior'. Despite her successful start, she will continue studying English at La Guardia Community College and later plans to pursue a career in journalism and thus fulfill her other dream: to be a communicator.

Born in San Pedro de Macoris, from early on she experienced a difficult home life. She endured constant neglect and rejection from her single mother, who eventually threw her out when she was only 8 years old. This led to a painful pilgrimage staying at the homes of several relatives. Finally, her father, who could not support or take care of her due to his dire economic situation, was forced to take 13-year old Fior to the Children of Christ Orphanage in La Romana. Center director Sonia Hane recalls, "He came to us with her and explained his situation. She was suffering from many stomach ailments and we took her in immediately. They

are still in touch."

Once her health was restored Fior soon adapted to her new life and was able to envision a brighter future for herself, "I always wanted to be a model and journalist. At the orphanage I practiced walking imitating models and actresses I saw on television. So by the time I got to the catwalk in New York I already knew how to walk and no one had to teach me anything." Her playmates at the orphanage confirm this. "When we had nothing to do, she would put on her heels and ask me to take photos and we would spend a whole afternoon this way," says Carmen Laura, who has only good words for Mendez, "I don't miss her because she is always very present in my thoughts. She always supported me, through thick and thin and she has a very beautiful heart."

She arrived in States with the help of from Hane, Esperanza Rodriguez and her daughter Karen Conlon who help her filling out the visa paperwork. She currently lives with Rodríguez and Conlon in Queens and is being sponsored by an Orphanage donor. She thanks the help of Andy Stein, another supporter of the Orphanage, who introduced her to the director of Signature Talent Agency, who immediately signed her. However she is no longer with them and is working on her portfolio and a new agency.

"Stories like Fior's are a source of pride for all of us at the orphanage. It encourages us to keep forging ahead, and gives the other children an example to follow to achieve their dreams," Hane proudly says. She is in contact with Mendez almost on a daily basis. "Because of her character and enthusiasm I always knew that she would make it," says her friend Carmen Laura.

Meanwhile, Fior is enjoying New York and its opportunities, hoping one day to model



for Oscar de la Renta and match the success of Tyra Banks, one of her favorite models, "Sometimes I go to Times Square, my favorite place, and I sit on a bench where you can see the whole street, with all its lights. I love that feeling of energy."

Maria Escudero

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