

**“Style is a way to say who you are without having to speak.” — Rachel Zoe**

Fashion and beauty are marketed to us in all avenues, from signage on tall buildings in downtown to pamphlets scattered on a coffee table in our local coffee shop. Yet, historically there's been a lack of representation in fashion and beauty specifically of women with disabilities. Catalogs have embraced models with disabilities for many years - children using wheelchairs or visually impaired teens - but the mass media, major designers have traditionally turned a blind eye...up until recently.

**Jillian Mercado** is American fashion model represented by IMG Models. As a wheelchair user (due to Muscular Dystrophy) she is one of the few professional models who has a physical disability the fashion industry. Her beautiful presence has created a new wave of models challenging beauty ideals in the fashion industry. Mercado is keen to fight the lack of representation of people with disabilities in the fashion industry and their enduring stigma.

**NY Fashion Week** has begun to embrace models with physical disabilities - a trend that is increasing every year. They started with Dr. Danielle Sheypuk, PH.D. - a clinical psychologist who won Mrs. Wheelchair America - roll down the catwalk a few years back, showing that everyone woman, wheels or not can rock high heels and look sexy. This year, NY Fashion Week designers once again proved that their beautiful clothing is a reflection of women's fashion that looks just as beautiful on woman walking as it does on one sitting down. Last week, American Horror Story actor Jamie Brewer - an amputee -walked the catwalk to become the first such model. Her message? “We're role models, not just runway models.”

Even locally, we are seeing a shift in embracing disability as beautiful. There are a number of local nonprofits and businesses who are including models with Down Syndrome, physical and mental disabilities a part of the main act. Earlier this year, Funclusion, a Broward nonprofit annual event focused on inclusivity and fashion. I participated in the event as a designer – their first with a disability. Needless to say, the show was a great success! Here's a link to a snippet of last year's show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV0fe8GqzOQ>

*Stay Beautiful!*

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**Author:** Lorinda Gonzalez resides in South Florida with her family and service dog, Remy. She was diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy at the age of three, and has used a motorized wheelchair for mobility since the age of nine. As an avid writer and reader, she has worked as a grant writer and editor since 2009. She recently participated in Bold Beauty Project where she was a model supporting the cause of showcasing women with disabilities and

beautiful and sexy. Lorinda holds a Bachelor in the Arts Degree in English Writing and Rhetoric, and is currently completing a Masters of Arts Degree in Communications. She is a co-founder of NMD United, a 501c3 and on the board of multiple non-profit organizations. In her free time, Lorinda enjoys spending time with family and friends, painting, listening to music, and traveling to historical locations.