

FRESH

Josie Steenhout talks to slow fashion designer Sandra Tupu about her experience at iD Dunedin Fashion Week in 2010 and 2025.

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FRESH STYLE
JOSIE STEENHOUT

FIFTEEN years after presenting her graduate collection at iD Dunedin's Emerging Designer Awards 2010 — and winning the Sustainability prize — Sandra Tupu returned to the city to showcase her slow fashion label Flying Fox at this year's event — and tread in the footsteps of her parents, who lived and met here in the 1950s.

Q. You were a finalist at the 2010 iD Emerging Designer Awards?

The iD Dunedin 2010 Emerging Designer show was a fantastic experience, and ultimately winning the Sustainability award topped it all off. From being able to choose our own models through to the runway show I felt very empowered and welcome as a new New Zealand designer among an amazing international cohort.

Q. What inspired you to return this year?

With more time on my hands now, I'm trying to build my brand and slowly get Flying Fox out there more. Flying Fox is dedicated to artisanal slow fashion, making beautiful clothes that last a long time, whether for the individual, performing arts or small capsule collections that tell an interesting story often drawn from cultural perspectives. [I'm] always seeking to tread lightly — using recycled elements, incorporating eco-printing along with trying to create less waste within our industry. Providing a service to our local community for repair and alteration to increase the lifespan of our clothes.

Q. Tell us a bit about what went down the catwalk?

Mum recently gave me an old family antique book about Scottish clans that inspired me to delve into our Scottish side. Agnes Harper, my great grandmother, came out to Aotearoa from Dunedin in the late 1800s. Family history and my own experience of travelling in Scotland, especially getting lost on the Cullins on the Isle of Skye, has been my main inspiration. "Harper" (the name of the latest collection) is a sept (family group) name within the Buchanan clan. My range has been created by translating geographical shapes into my physical patterns — Isle of Skye, Buchanan land area and the Isle of Clar Innis have helped to create new and interesting fabric forms on and off the body. I've used Oak (our clan badge) in my eco-printing. I wanted to challenge myself by using a new technique of low-waste pattern making, subtraction method — to evoke a feeling of bravery, courage and "new ground" similar to my great grandmother's journey. Harper's colour palette is drawn from the Highlands landscape and heather. The style is one of interesting volume and texture championing New Zealand wool. Collaborating with luxury wool producer Palliser Ridge and New Zealand yarn producer The Kindly Dyer.

Q. How was your show experience this time? Victoria Muir (iD event manager) and Barbara Power (backstage management) did an amazing job organising iD 2025, even though the backstage area was pretty tight to work around. My models were fantastic, meeting and fitting them worked seamlessly. Being able to talk through my "Harper" story and background was an important part as they really brought it to life on the runway.

I did love having the lead model walk on with a brand



In the making... Sandra Tupu works on different ranges of clothing including Afi Vao (blue cardigan) and Harper, and private commissions.

T-shirt, a nice touch. And huge thanks for making available the sponsored pop-up space. It was wonderful to have emerging designers and young students work part of the main show. There were lots of opportunities to connect with fellow designers. This was very empowering as a designer.

Q. And how did it compare to 2010?

My experience back in 2010 seemed a bit different as the emerging designer competition and showcase was separated from the main runway station show back then. Ours was held at another venue, so it was nice to be all together this time. One thing I did like at the emerging showcase in 2010 was the choreography of the models and collections — you were able to see the collection out in a group format after their individual walks on the runway. This group vision I feel is important to complete the whole picture of your range as a designer.

Q. You had (radio host) Matty McLean wearing Flying Fox both in your capsule showcase and during his time on the runway as MC, how did that come about?

Again a big thank you to Victoria Muir, who suggested Matty walk for Flying Fox clothing. I was more than happy to make an outfit for him. It was lovely meeting Matty when he came out for a fitting to my studio and I could tell him about

Flying Fox and the story behind "Harper". He took the challenge of modelling seriously and was fabulous rocking out "Harper" by Flying Fox on the runway. Thank you Matty.

Q. Any favourite things about Dunedin?

I haven't spent much time in Dunedin. Love the beach. My parents studied and met here in the late '50s and I would like to see the

places my parents lived and visited. I'm planning on visiting the region after iD.

Q. How was your time in Dunedin over the week?

Loved being back here in Dunedin. The Eden Home exhibition alongside iD opening night was a highlight. Staying in an old building apartment overlooking the gardens was a treat, having mum here and visiting where my dad used to live on Stafford St and where they would hang out in the 1950s was a special moment. St Clair beach: having a celebratory lunch with family and friends including a few locals.

Visiting Etrusco at the Savoy with friends from Melbourne who came to the show, I remember coming here in 2010! NZ Opera were in town one night and sang for the whole restaurant!

Q. Your mum and grandma have been big influences in your life and work — tell us a bit about that?

I have many fond memories of Mum making most of our clothes growing up in the 1970s onwards. I distinctly remember a purple raincoat when I was young. She would make her own outfits and would always look so good, from pant suits to simple dresses. Often ask Mum for her opinion — she is still a great inspiration. My grandma Winsome did the same until she couldn't due to arthritis. She would sneak beautifully on outfits for our own babies. She lived through WWII and was widowed young so had to bring up two girls by herself and became very frugal, saving everything, something I still do!



From 2010 to 2025... Models wear designs by Sandra Tupu, including her "Tatau" collection from iD 2010 (above right) and her Flying Fox collection from this year's iD show at the Dunedin Railway Station which features radio host Matty McLean as a model (top).

PHOTOS: LINDA ROBERTSON

We also spent three months in Samoa in 1973 when I was 9 years old and I remember my Auntie Luisa and grandmother Eleri sewing on the old treadle machine in the village — such a simple setup.

Growing up in a hard-working New Zealand/Pacific family Mum and Dad would always make and create by themselves rather than pay someone or buying new. A self-taught builder, my dad spent a lot of time renovating/fixing things including our house. This can-do attitude definitely rubbed off on us as children and I started making clothes for myself from a teenager in the late '70s early '80s loving creating and making.

Q. How did you get into the industry?

While living in Melbourne in the early 2000s I decided to retrain from computer programming, and started a clothing certificate course in a TAFE college part-time. Relocating to Auckland in 2004, I looked to continue this and enrolled fulltime in AUT's Art and Design degree programme in 2007, graduating in 2009.

Q. And why did you start Flying Fox?

I started Flying Fox after graduating from AUT. The name evolved from my graduate collection "Tatau". This range explored my Samoan heritage and drew from the male Pe'a tatou (traditional tattoo) and rites of passage for a young Samoan male as he becomes guardian of his family, like the Pe'a is a guardian of the forest. Pe'a means flying fox.

Q. Tell us about your workspace

My workspace is a small home-based studio in a converted double garage. Full of lots of family relics, collected fabrics and notions including a few old but goodie machines.

Q. You also lecture at AUT?

Over the past couple of years I've contracted to AUT as a part-time lecturer. I love working with the students and passing on my knowledge and values, especially those of sustainability.

Q. And you've recently been working on theatre costume?

My most recent theatre work

was Witi's Wahine as costume designer/maker. Working with Hapal Productions was very empowering. I love their kaupapa (principles). Wonderful to be trusted to bring their vision into life using my design process.

Q. What else do you get up to?

Currently I'm involved with Mindful Fashion NZ as a director, representing our members. I'm very passionate about our industry becoming more accountable, sustainable and collectively growing our voice and encouraging our New Zealand fashion industry to thrive. I'm a mum of four and grandma to five. Family, aiga, is big on my agenda! I enjoy cold swims, hiking in nature and playing squash.

Q. Where are you headed in the region post-iD?

Today we're heading to the Catlins for three days for a much-needed break... basing ourselves at Kaka point. We're keen to explore the area including Nugget Point, McLean Falls, the hoiho (penguins), caves and Slope Point.



Sandra Tupu.

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