

The following is from a winner of City's Next Top Mannequin Challenge. Aori Chiren Rodriguez was chosen to dress the blue mannequin due to her incredible kimono design and the symbolism of each part.

Dear City Sewing Room,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to participate in the Blue Mannequin Challenge. It was a meaningful and deeply personal project for me. I poured my heart into every stitch—bringing together symbols of peace, culture, feminism, sustainability, and hope. I explained about my project below.

★Sewing and Human Connection★

After moving to the U.S., I've met so many incredible people. Yes, the country is politically and racially divided in many ways. But I've found that beyond nationality, race, beliefs, or religion—**people can still connect.**

Last time, it was my love for animals that brought me together with others. At dog parks or animal shelters, I always met kind, passionate people, even if our views or backgrounds were different. We shared something in common—love. And that was enough to become friends, talk, laugh, and care about each other.

This time, it was **sewing and crafts that created that same connection.** City Sewing Room welcomed me so warmly. Although I've done many types of art and craft since I was a child, sewing—especially with a machine—is still new to me. I started only a few years ago, so this challenge was hard, but also very exciting and rewarding.

★Why I Chose Kimono★

I wanted to show how kimono reflects not only beauty but also family legacy, sustainability and values.

In Japan, kimono is often passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter. Since it's made from straight pieces of fabric and doesn't rely on zippers or buttons, it can be resized for different generations. It's adjusted—not discarded—fitting anyone from small to plus sizes. **This tradition treats fabric as sacred. We believe that everything, even fabric, has a spirit.** That's why traditionally, we don't cut it unless we must. We tie it, hand-sew it, and reshape it to fit the body while preserving the integrity of the cloth.

For this project, I had to cut the top and bottom for practicality. But the pieces are still very adjustable—they can fit a wide range of sizes and I designed several different styles for each skirt to shape different styles.

I used a large ribbon-style obi belt inspired by traditional Japanese dress, and although I used Velcro for ease, in Japan, we usually use long strings to tie the belt beautifully and can shape many different styles. **Kimono adapts with your body, no matter how it changes—just like the love and care passed down through generations.**

Kimono is like a wedding dress or formal dresses in many ways—full of memory, care, and tailoring—but also used in everyday life. I wanted to show that connection.

★Symbols in My Design★

The bottom part of the outfit includes blue jeans and a yellow V-shape. **The blue represents workwear and practical labor. The yellow honeycomb speaks to environmental awareness**—especially around bee conservation, one of the most debated global issues today. These two colors represent different types of people: those living day by day, working hard, and those who have more resources to focus on broader environmental concerns. Even if they seem divided, we need both. I wanted to reflect that contrast and connection.

The upper part is quite self explanatory. **Blue represents samurai blue** :)

Underneath the skirt, I added a **pink chiffon petticoat. It represents femininity—and the hidden social expectations around it.** While gender equality is discussed more today, I still feel that certain roles are silently expected of women. We're told we can be anything, strong and independent, yet still expected to be gentle or traditionally feminine. This contradiction still exists beneath the surface.

The pink petticoat symbolizes these quiet pressures. I don't mean to say it's right or wrong—it's not my place to judge—but I wanted to highlight that many expectations and inequalities still exist, whether we acknowledge them or not. **This layer is my hidden message.**

★Prayers for Peace★

One of the fabrics I used was military-style, and that brought up a lot of mixed emotions. I don't have military members in my family, but I have many American friends who serve. (I went to A&M in Texas.) I worry about them. I think about peace.

In Japan, cranes are a symbol of peace and prayer. So, I folded a crane from the military fabric, like a message: Please come back safely. Fly home in peace.

I also added a cherry blossom flower with seven petals—a unique twist on the traditional five. In Japanese culture, as well as many others, **the number seven is considered lucky and symbolizes happiness and blessings. The flower represents spring, hope, and the heartfelt wish for people to return home safely and joyfully.** That's what I stitched into this piece: my quiet wishes.

Needless to say, **the crane lands on U.S. and Native American land, symbolizing the United States Declaration of Independence.** I used Powwow fabric for the book cover—made from a recycled Blu-ray case—and also for the belt, which can be worn as a tie or scarf.

★One Stitch, One Wish★

In the end, my costume is more than just fabric—it's full of messages. Even if we live in a divided country, filled with different religions, beliefs, and politics, I truly believe we all share something in common.

Right now, for me, that common ground is craft and sewing. I hope that when someone is angry or frustrated with others, they can pause to think about something they love—and realize that even the person they're upset with probably loves something, too. Someone else loves and cares about that person. If we all remember that, maybe we can be more patient. Kinder. More generous.

That's my wish. I'm not perfect—I get tired and frustrated too—but I'm trying my best. This project gave me hope and joy.

Thank you so much to City Sewing Room for this opportunity.

The link of skirts and other parts to show I used recycled fabrics and items, how my design could fit almost all.

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Y7luNNcXngCZNSEuCCb8FjKrK8w0vhUI>

Warmly,
Aori Chiren Rodriguez
Founder, [Japanese Institute of St. Louis](#)



The kimono created for City Sewing Room's blue mannequin by Aori Chiren Rodriguez.