

# Brevard designer sews up a niche all his own



Video: Melbourne Fashion Designer Michael Emmanuel talks about his work. Video by Tim Shortt. Posted 9/15/14.

Sara Paulson, FLORIDA TODAY 5:41 p.m. EDT September 26, 2014



(Photo: TIM SHORTT/FLORIDA TODAY)

Margaret Velez-Cammarata was instantly enthralled.

A leasing manager in Suntree three years ago, Velez-Cammarata had helped a family relocating to Brevard from the Northeast. Their relative, Michael Emmanuel, came to visit from Atlanta. He had experience working in apartment management and was considering relocating himself.

"I liked his demeanor, loved his fashion sense," Velez-Cammarata says. "He was smart looking, he was smart talkin', and he was just so delightful."

When she discovered he was a longtime clothing designer, she was on a mission.

"I said, 'We've got to get you down here.' Florida needs you."

And Florida got him.

Emmanuel has worked for Velez-Cammarata, 53, in apartment leasing and as a host at Imperial Salon and Spa in Suntree. But his passion is helping women look and feel their best.

"He loves women, knows how to talk to women," she says. "He knows how to make a woman feel beautiful."

That's his goal with [Michael Emmanuel Couture \(http://www.michaelmanuelcouture.com/\)](http://www.michaelmanuelcouture.com/).

"I want folks to look good and feel good and feel comfortable," Emmanuel says. "I love doing what I do. I love designing."

He's no newbie, either. Emmanuel, 53, has been at it since he was 19. He's traveled the country, sharing his vibrant looks in New York, Chicago, California and Atlanta.

Now, he's making a name for himself on the Space Coast. His clients? Fashionistas looking for anything from a casual but striking blouse to an elegant ensemble.

"Anyone who wants that special, one-of-a-kind design," Emmanuel says of customers. "When you have it on and you walk in, it makes them stop, look and say, 'Wow.'"

His designs have had a commanding presence at [Space Coast Fashion Week \(http://www.spacecoastfashionweek.com/\)](http://www.spacecoastfashionweek.com/) for the past two years. More of his pieces will take center stage Dec. 9 at a fashion show for the first official [Women of the Wild \(/story/life/style/suzy-leonard/2014/09/06/wow-factor-positive-change-space-coast/15156421/\)](http://www.spacecoastfashionweek.com/story/life/style/suzy-leonard/2014/09/06/wow-factor-positive-change-space-coast/15156421/) event at the Brevard Zoo.

The designs on display will celebrate the spirit of the conservation consortium of women, from vibrant colors to animal prints. And they aren't for just the super-skinny, either.

"I love the idea that he was not somebody who was attuned to just one style and one body type," Karen Davis, development director at the zoo, says of the style envisioned for the WOW celebration. "There's a real kindness to him, but he obviously loves what he does."

Emmanuel is a tall, trim, handsome man. And he's a hugger. It doesn't matter if you met him three seconds ago. He's all about making his guests feel as if they're old friends.

His creative space in his Melbourne apartment is where the magic happens. A dining room table, encased in a zebra-print tablecloth, boasts his two sewing machines, a serger, various spools of thread and a spattering of fabrics. A portrait of Albert Einstein hangs on the wall, a stunning ivory gown graces a mannequin in the foreground.

"I create when the mood hits me," Emmanuel says.

The sewing machine whirrs as he finishes a green, leaf-patterned swing blouse. His work, hanging throughout his home, stretches from simple to luxurious.

"You can be going to a dance, you could be going on a cruise," Emmanuel says. "I do everything. From sportswear to easy breezy. Then I have elegance."

He creates for both divas and divos, but mostly the former, he notes. "I design because it comforts me," Emmanuel says. "I design because it's one of those things — I go to my own world."

### **In the beginning**

Before beginning a garment, he makes sure he has his vices — his "house music" and his liquid refreshment, either a Sprite or a bottle of water.

The start is simple. "I'll see fabric that catches my eye," Emmanuel says.

He'll toss it on his mannequin and begin cutting. But what he envisioned can take on a new direction mid-design. An A-line skirt could suddenly sport a flair. "Very rarely do I use patterns," Emmanuel says. "I'm a hands-free designer."

Something simple could take 10 minutes. Something detailed, a bit longer. He's a fan of linen, vibrant colors and patchwork.

"Most of my fabrics all have a one-ply stretch to it," Emmanuel says. "Because if it has a stretch to it, anybody can wear it."

### **Finding fashion**

Micheal Emmanuel Toney was born to Catherine Young on Nov. 8, 1961, in Greenwich, Connecticut. His father, Garfenia McCrimmon, "was a rolling stone" and not around, Emmanuel explains.

But that was fine. Emmanuel grew up in Port Chester, New York, with his mom and stepfather. His mom describes him as incredibly gracious.

"He's very family oriented," says Young, 70, of Melbourne. "As a child, he always used to say, 'Mommy, one day I'm going to build you a house.'"

Emmanuel recalls that as a kid, there were "always fashion shows and dance parties, and I would go and I would always be the center of attraction. I love to dance, and I always had that fashion sense to be a little different."

When he was 10, his sister was born. ("Tanisha is my heart," he says.) He gladly doted on her.

"He went through a lot because I was always in and out of the hospital," Young says. "He helped with his sister, to get her ready for school and those kinds of things. He had to grow up fast."

Emmanuel was a teen when he began to question his sexuality. He'd had girlfriends in the past, but sensed that wasn't how his heart was wired. He came out at 18.

It was something his deeply religious mom initially struggled with.

"I'm an ordained minister and I stand on God's word," Young, an Apostle, says. "And I can't compromise that. (But) I love my son very much. I am very proud of him."

Young says her son is a wonderful man.

"He's always reaching out to others," she says. "He always has other people at his heart, in his best interest. His interest is, 'I want to help others.' He's always been like that. It's amazing."

He was 19 when the designing bug bit. While visiting friend Michael Rodriguez, a fashion designer and runway model in New York City, Emmanuel was in awe as he watched an outfit spring to life. Wanting more, Rodriguez taught Emmanuel the craft.

His first fashion show was at a bar called Herman's — "a place where everybody went on the weekends to dance and have a good time," Emmanuel says.

Eventually, Emmanuel decided to give the West Coast a shot, moving to Long Beach, California, for a few years. But NYC — and its four seasons — beckoned him back.

In 1986, he was introduced into theater at the National Black Theater in Harlem.

"I became the costume designer for off-Broadway plays," Emmanuel says. That included "The Legacy" (which aired on CBS). He once was nominated for an Audelco Award for costume design. The late designer Judy Dearing was fond of Emmanuel and made him her personal assistant for some plays.

He trekked down to Atlanta for 23 years, where he continued fashion shows and photo shoots.

### **Meeting his family**

Family has always been a staple for Emmanuel. For many years, it was just his mom, sister and him.

When he was 26, he received a call from a man named Barry Young-McCrimmon. Turns out, he had a brother. At the time, Emmanuel was modeling for the Apollo Theater. He suggested his brother meet him backstage after a show.

"It was like a movie," Emmanuel says. "I opened up the back stage door, across the street, there's a car, and there's someone standing (at) the car, hands folded ... at that moment, when I'd first seen him, I knew who he was. We came to each other and we hugged each other, and we started crying."

They got to know one another, and Young-McCrimmon promised a surprise at Emmanuel's next show. He proved true to his word.

After 26 years, Emmanuel finally met his father.

"As a child growing up and not knowing (who my father was) ..." Emmanuel says, trailing off a bit as he chokes back his emotion. "When you see them, it's just like ... that missing piece to the puzzle. It was like the happiest day of my life."

Emmanuel embraced the opportunity to know his dad and his long-lost siblings. (He is one of 15.) Young-McCrimmon, 53, who remains in New York, "has been at every single show" since, no matter the locale.

"I'm amazed he has the talent in some of the things I've seen him do," Young-McCrimmon says. "When he's doing a show, I come because of my pride."

Young-McCrimmon says he's had some of the best laughs of his life hanging out with his brother. And Emmanuel's sexuality has never been an issue.

"That is so not important," Young-McCrimmon says. "I couldn't care less. Whether he's straight, gay or crooked, he's still my brother. ... My brother, his heart is made with gold. So, that's the bottom line."

When Emmanuel's father died shortly after their meeting, he tried to fly in for the funeral on a standby ticket. He never made it.

"I was just devastated," Emmanuel says. "To this day, whenever I hear Luther Vandross, 'Dance with my Father,' no matter where I am, I don't care who I'm with, it just comes over me."

## **Welcome to Brevard**

Emmanuel moved to Brevard after his mom, aunt and sister did.

"My sister said, 'You've got to move here to Florida ... because you gotta help raise your little nephew,' " he says of Jace, 4. "That was it for me."

Emmanuel, who also juggles a full-time gig in apartment leasing, is thrilled to be a new member of the Melbourne Regional Chamber of Commerce.

And he's enjoying making his mark as a designer here. There is not a special someone in his life right now. But that's OK. There's time.

Malak Hammad, who is involved with the chamber and Women of the Wild, is a big fan.

"He has a lot of flair," Hammad says of his designs. "And I love that. ... If someone has something in mind, he can do it in a heartbeat."

Hammad thinks Emmanuel is perfect for WOW's fashion show debut. "It's a little different from anyone we've seen locally," Hammad says. "We thought what a perfect fit it would be to actually do that."

She also loves how he is willing to work with her vision. Take the stunner of an ivory dress he's making her for WOW.

"He showed me a picture of the gown, and my immediate reaction was, 'Does it have a scarf?' " Hammad says. "He said no, and two seconds later, he said, 'It will have a scarf.' "

With other designers she's met, "Their style is their style, and there's no way they'll make changes because I'm asking them to. But he's more than willing."

Friend Velez-Cammarata, now the general manager at Imperial Salon and Spa in Indian Harbour Beach, aspires to model his designs someday. She also happens to think he's just all-around wonderful.

"I love the person he is inside and out," she says. "The creations that he makes. I can't say enough good things about him. He is one of the kindest people that I've ever met, too."

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## **Learn more**

Check out more about Michael Emmanuel and his work at [michaelemmanuelcouture.com](http://michaelemmanuelcouture.com) (<http://michaelemmanuelcouture.com>)

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