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The Bold Visionaries Behind the New Collection From UPRISERS & PacSun

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The evolution of Michelle K. Hanabusa is a story that embodies art, sheer determination, and the tireless pursuit of a childhood dream. But the revolutionary tale of this fashion designer is far more riveting than that. She's the founder and creative director of UPRISERS, a forward-thinking streetwear brand that carries the boldness of MTV in its heyday with the political savviness of an alternative newspaper. Two and a half years ago, the young CEO introduced her liberal fashion line to the world with an unapologetically bold symbol. The Gidra tee by UPRISERS displayed the imagine of a young group of Asian American activists holding up the middle finger. This was followed by a series of product launches in support of migrants at the US border and a marketing campaign to combat colorism within the Filipino community.

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In response to her progressive approach to marketing and branding, some of her critics in the mainstream termed her clothing line a "niche brand." They were wrong. Less than one year after starting UPRISERS, she was contacted by PacSun about a potential collaboration. Those preliminary talks have finally come to fruition. Today is the day that UPRISERS drops a brand-new collection with one of America's most popular retail companies.

The brand-new collection by UPRISERS and PacSun is called the Uprisers.World Collection. It includes specially designed tees, hoodies, and reflective pants. "I can't believe it's finally launching! I remember being on a call with the PacSun team when they finally told me it's going to launch in February of 2021," Hanabusa shared. "My heart skipped a beat. Being a woman and Asian American and to have worked my ass off since 2016, sharing our mission with UPRISERS on a national scale is something that I know I will be able to look back and say: Michelle, I did that! Trusting my gut to give 100% authenticity to the brand and what it stands for, regardless of what others have told me in the past, proves that when you speak your truth and go about it with the right intentions, the world starts opening doors for you. PacSun saw that and has given me the creative freedom to really showcase the DNA of the brand."

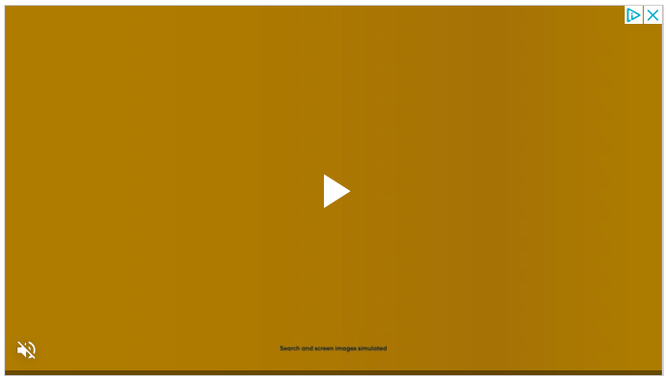
The DNA of UPRISERS is steeped in Japanese American history, which is a big reason the Los Angeles native included a floral design in her new collection. The flowers are Hanabusa's way of sharing a piece of her culture with the world, while also paying homage to the first-generation Japanese Americans who originally started the Southern California Market back in 1912.

In typical UPRISERS fashion, the sentimental message behind their new product launch will also be accompanied by a little bit of rebellion. The Uprisers.World Collection features a familiar finger sign, which, truth be told, is somewhat of a clapback at their former critics. But, according to Hanabusa, there's layers to this proverbial hand gesture. "The middle finger is more than just a rebellious symbol," she said. "It was inspired by the iconic 1969 Gidra photo taken by Mike Murase of the Gidra Sisterhood. They were the pioneers of the Voice of Asian American Movement. When I first started UPRISERS, this photo is what gave me courage to officially start my business. The middle finger symbolizes, on a personal level, to not stay silent anymore (stand up for what is right) and on a community front, to find ways to come together to rise up and do better for our future."

Instead of being a cliché for the counter culture, UPRISERS has become a platform for an entire culture that was being severely underrepresented — a creative space by Hanabusa for Asian Americans who are just like her. But what started off as a brand that focused primarily on her own community soon became a movement that resonated with people of all ethnicities.

"I knew that if I was going to put everything into a brand that I truly believed in I had to voice my truth – 100% of my truth," Hanabusa said. "Being part of this journey of fighting for representation and advocating for movements and individuals who have fought long and hard for a seat at the table; I feel I could most authentically build UPRISERS. I want to focus on the Asian American experience and collaborate with other marginalized groups to tell their authentic stories."

The story of how this Japanese American fashion designer landed a historic collaboration between her clothing line and PacSun has many layers, because this accomplishment was built on years of teamwork, friendships, business relationships, and the fight for social justice. Today, we celebrate UPRISERS' new product launch with PacSun and we take a look back at the people and key events helped them get here.



Michelle K. Hanabusa Keeps It Real

Michelle K. Hanabusa shares a bond with her art director that dates back nearly half a decade. The day that Saúl López flew all the way to Japan from Los Angeles, just to spend 24 hours with Hanabusa at her first pop-up event lives on as an UPRISERS saga till this very day. "Saúl has been with me through the thick and thin, even when I failed miserably and nothing was going on. During my lows, he would casually just check in to see how things were going and he has stuck by my side. He's been one of my most consistent creative collaborators and I am very grateful to have him on the team," Hanabusa said.

Nowadays, when López shoots a video for UPRISERS, it's likely in support of a marketing campaign that was generated by the team's social media strategist, Kari Okubo. In 2018, she joined UPRISERS as an intern but now, Hanabusa refers to Okubo as "the mastermind behind many of our campaigns." Okubo's out-of-the-box approach for making new content for the brand was a key component in the presentation of collections like Asia x UPRISERS. Okubo was also the catalyst behind a host of other social awareness campaigns for the fashion line, including the one that helped UPRISERS affect change all over the world: #HATEISAVIRUS

Asia Jackson and Michelle K. Hanabusa Fight Colorism With Fashion

Hate Is a Virus is a social awareness campaign that sprung from a brainstorming session at Michelle K. Hanabusa's apartment with her team in early March 2020. The term was coined by Kari Okubo and soon thereafter #HateIsAVirus became so powerful that it transcended the company and it became a global movement. The intricacies of this Asian American and Pacific Islander-based campaign might not have reached its full potential without success of its two predecessors, the first of which was called SCFM x UPRISERS. This campaign was created to pay tribute to the Japanese American immigrants who established the Southern California Flower Market in the early 1900s. The company's second AAPI based campaign was titled the Asia x UPRISERS. It was created to commemorate #MagandangMorenx by Asia Jackson. Each of these marketing campaigns inspired the unveiling of a limited-edition collection by UPRISERS.

Before Jackson joined forces with UPRISERS, she started an uprising of her own. In 2016, the Filipino American actress created an initiative called #MagandangMorenx (which translates to "beautiful brown person" in the Tagalog language) in order to fight colorism within the Filipino community. Being a Filipino American with a Black father, she wanted to encourage brown and tan people in the Filipino community to embrace their skin color. It wasn't long before this powerful message went global. And soon thereafter, it sparked Hanabusa's interest. Although the fashion designer had never met Jackson, she had become an admirer of her work.

So, when the opportunity presented itself for UPRISERS to commemorate #MagandangMorenx with a brand-new product launch for Jackson, Hanabusa jumped at the opportunity to finally meet one of her inspirations. And the feeling was definitely mutual. "The first time I met [Michelle] actually was about three weeks before we launched [Asia x UPRISERS]," Jackson said. "We collaborated with another Asian-American artist. Her name is Sophia Chang, and she's done a lot of cool work with Nike and Adidas. When it came to where we were going to put the designs on the hoodie and T-shirt, Michelle and I collaborated very closely on that. I sent her some ideas that I thought would be really cool. Then she dialed it in with her graphic design experience in fashion and merchandising. Because this was the first collection I have ever done, working with Michelle was really great because it felt almost like a mentorship."

Hanabusa echoed that sentiment, when she was asked about the first time that she met Jackson. "I actually followed Asia's journey for quite some time before we connected. So, I was beyond excited to bring [Asia x UPRISERS] to life in October of 2019. The collection sold out multiple times! Since then, we have continued to collaborate on many fronts."

Asia x UPRISERS was originally intended to be a limited release, but the compelling message behind the collaborative effort between Jackson and Hanabusa sent ripple effects throughout the Asian and American Pacific Islander communities. The feedback from the Filipino community about this drop was so positive that the two entrepreneurs formed a bond and pledged to work with one another again. Their newfound friendship would come in handy because a different kind of challenge was slowly brewing in the air. As COVID-19 began to rear its ugly head, the Asian American community would soon face an onslaught of attacks on all fronts.

This was the very beginning of Hate Is a Virus.

The Asian Community Rallies Behind #HATEISAVIRUS

Once COVID-19 spread to the United States, the sickness ran rampant through the country's short supply of surgical masks and ventilators. As the pandemic shutdowns began and the deaths piled up, former United States President Donald Trump and some of his allies publicly blamed China for the devastation. After those accusations were made, hateful rhetoric ensued against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders all over the country. Hate speech from within the general population gained momentum and it eventually snowballed into a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes nationwide.

Some of the staff members from UPRISERS watched these unfortunate events unfold on the news (or via social media), while others were victims of the abuse firsthand. They knew that they were going to use their platform to speak up for yet another social matter. But unlike their experience in speaking out during the company's two previous AAPI based campaigns, this time around their entire race was being attacked. People were being victimized and small business were getting vandalized. The world needed a response, so the UPRISERS staff aimed to give them one.

"We knew we couldn't just sit there and be silent. Since all of our events were canceled, we focused our energy brainstorming and figuring out how we can support Asian restaurants locally here in LA," said Michelle K. Hanabusa. "We coined the term #HATEISAVIRUS that day. I posted on my personal Instagram and in a [Facebook] group called Asian Hustle Network. What started off as a weekly food crawl to support our local Asian restaurants grew to a digital grassroots movement when I teamed up with Tammy Cho and Bryan Pham (the co-founders of Hate Is a Virus). Tammy and Bryan both reached out separately and after a few conversations, the three of us together decided to take Hate Is a Virus to the digital space. Within two weeks, the movement started to reach across the US and globally."

Together, Hanabusa, Cho, and Pham turned the outside world's distain for their community into a beautiful display of love and empowerment amongst Asians and Pacific Islanders. "Since launching as a movement to respond to the rise in hate crimes against our AAPI community, we have heard back from people around the world about what excited them about our movement and what more we could do to better serve our communities," Cho said. "That's why we're thrilled about launching Hate Is a Virus as a nonprofit with a mission to combat hate by mobilizing AAPI and standing with other communities of color."

The Hate Is a Virus organization has countered attacks on their community with educational content, live streaming concerts, celebrity panels, Instagram Live discussions, and a variety of merchandise designed by Hanabusa (and a number of celebrity designers like Vanness Wu and Jennet Liaw) — all in the name of their cause. When this movement kicked into high gear, photos of prominent influencers and steadfast supporters wearing surgical face masks with the words "Hate Is a Virus" printed on them began to circulate all over social media. #HATEISAVRUS soon became a pillar for the AAPI community as more celebrities started to reaffirm the battle cry.

"This is the first time that the majority of Asians have decided that we're not going to stick low, we're not going to shut up and take it, we're not going to just bow our heads and wait for this phase to be over," said model and photographer Tiffanie Marie in her declaration about why she decided to contribute *to* Hate Is a Virus. "It wasn't about replacing their hate with our hate and our anger. It was about us being like, 'Hey, look, see us as human beings. Treat us as human beings. We just want for you to respectfully understand that we are Americans. We're human beings. We're still contributors and creatives. We're beautiful people here that are just trying to live a life and trying to pursue happiness just like you are.'"

With so many artists and creators coming together for this cause, it was only right that Hanabusa release a collection in support of #HATEISAVIRUS. The imagery of an Asian "lady liberty" printed on what is known as the UPRISERS x Van Ness Wu Peace Hoodie will always be a long-lasting symbol for the ways positivity can light up the world during its darkest times. That's a notion that's shared by many of the campaign's celebrity contributors.

"[Hate is a Virus] brought us a sense of collective identity, allowing us to talk and process our complex feelings of being both victims and perpetrators or racism within the framework of the United States. It was very healing and confirmed my belief in the power of community. After all, we are made for each other," said activist and musician MILCK. The singer-songwriter was joined by an array of other celebrities in her stance with Hate Is a Virus. Among the other stars to speak out in support of the movement were Sandra Oh, SuChin Park, Baron Davis, Apollo Ohno, Megan Lee, Jason Chu, Maulik Pancholy, and many more.

Last Spring, UPRISERS became a global beacon of inspiration for the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. The independent streetwear brand helped turn #HATEISAVIRUS into a revolution that is still going strong. But nevertheless, recent studies have shown a huge increase in violence against the AAPI community. There is still allot of work to be done, but thanks to platforms like hateisavirus.org, people have been educated about the ways they can support UPRISERS and Hate Is a Virus in their effort to fight for the the rights of the AAPI community.

UPRISERS Come in All Colors — Black Lives Matter

By the end of Spring 2020, the #HATEISAVIRUS collection by UPRISERS became an artful depiction of all the people who represented the social movement and the grassroots organization that started it all. Kari Okubo spoke the words into existence and the three co-founders of Hate Is a Virus brought them to life. For UPRISERS, the first quarter of the year was defined by #HATEISAVIRUS, but perhaps another one of the brand's most defining moments came during the summertime, when the Black Lives Matter movement reached a boiling point in America.

As Michelle K. Hanabusa geared up to lend her support to the Black community, Saúl López ventured off on a solo detour to support the new civil rights movement. When the videographer attended a BLM protest in Los Angeles, he took an iconic close-up photo of Kendrick Lamar. At first glance, all you could see were the Grammy-winning rapper's eyes peering through a black hoodie, because his face and the rest of his upper body were completely covered in all black clothing. López later posted the image on Instagram. The message behind the photo was so powerful that it prompted UPRISERS to post the photo on their Instagram page as well, with the following caption from López: "I owe everything to Black culture. The Black community has given me friendship, mentorship, kindness, love, music, creative inspirations, role models and so much more. The fight to end racial injustice is a long one, but one I'm committed to being a part of through my art and my voice. Black Lives Matter."

The aforementioned photo was so memorable that it was turned in to a mural by an African American painter from Los Angeles named Shplinton. Heartfelt images like these popped up all over the city in the wake of George Floyd's murder. The tragedy of his death sparked a new round of BLM protests in Los Angeles, which inspired Hanabusa to support the Black community in their fight for equality. In the summer of 2020, UPRISERS teamed up with Black creatives like Tetona Jackson, Monica Ahanonu, Selorm.K, Asia Jackson, Sage Adams, Will Chill, and Shahd Batal for a Juneteenth celebration. Hanabusa also showed her solidarity with the Black community by starting an UPRISERS BLM initiative and releasing a No Justice No Peace collection.

Before Hanabusa ever thought of designing her first hoodie for a social cause, she was a figure skater and a teammate of Tetona Jackson's. The latter is now starring in the hit BET series *Boomerang*. The friendship between the two runs so deep that Hanabusa styled Tetona Jackson when the actress first appeared as a cast member of *Boomerang* at the BET Awards in 2019. That's very fitting, because throughout the years, Tetona Jackson has been there for some of Hanabusa's biggest moments with UPRISERS. She even wore the Gidra tee at the BET Experience, not just because Michelle is a childhood friend but because she believes that the CEO of UPRISERS is having a positive impact on people from all walks of life.

See also

"I honestly, I love it. I think it's so inspiring to see not just a woman, but a woman of color. First of all, it's such a big thing to be so vocal and speak up for so many people. I think it's really dope and it's really powerful what she's doing. And right now is the time to be doing it. She's cooking up," Tetona Jackson said.

After amplifying the voices of her own community, Hanabusa did her part to help reinforce the voices of Black business owners, Black artists, Black musicians, Black models, and Black entertainers. The push to celebrate the African American community was also joined by MILCK, an Asian American pop artist. Her limited-edition collection with UPRISERS displays the song title from a track that she dedicated to the Black community called "Someone's Beloved." Those words were printed on tees, hoodies, and beanies by UPRISERS with the proceeds going to Black Lives Matter and the Somebody's Beloved Fund (a foundation that raises money and awareness for racial injustice, LGBTQIA+ rights, mental health, feminism, and criminal justice reform).

The UPRISERS Show Up Fashionably Early For a "Political" Party

In the face of a very unforgiving 2020, UPRISERS stood up for the AAPI community. And when society threw the world yet another curveball, they adapted on the fly and re-directed their resources to the Black community. At the turn of the summer, the streetwear brand had become a force to be reckoned with. But with a presidential election on the horizon, the time had come for Michelle K. Hanabusa and her team of UPRISERS to up the ante by stepping into the political arena in order to affect change. For this to work, UPRISERS would spend the entirety of the fall season focusing on two marketing campaigns: #Census2020 and #Vote.

Some fashion lines in the mainstream have been known to insert themselves right in the middle of politics and social causes with ads and national commercials, but they rarely engage in full-fledged initiatives that mobilize and educate people about the ways they can influence federal funding in their communities. UPRISERS took on this daunting task by partnering with the Census Bureau.

"Statistics showed that our Asian American community was the highest minority group to not be counted in the last census. This [#2020Census] campaign was to share the importance of why being counted is crucial for the next decade in a cool, engaging way," Hanabusa said. The main objective behind this partnership was to the stress the importance of being counted by the Census Bureau so that federal funding could be allocated to underrepresented communities in the United States. In support of #2020Census, UPRISERS hosted a series of live discussions and a live streaming performance with celebrities such as Utkarsh Ambudkar, Solomon Georgio, and DUMBFOUNDED. NOHEMY was the only celebrity to participate in both events. The rapper/singer was introduced to Hanabusa just prior to #Census2020. The two would eventually go on to partner again for UPRISERS x PacSun collection, the following year.

The mobilization that came with #2020Census arrived just in time, because when October rolled around, the presidential race was in a dead heat. *The* UPRISERS x I Am a Voter collection dropped on the first day on the month. These hoodies and tops were accompanied by a series of inspirational ads that were intended to encourage people to be "warriors of change." Given the impact that politics had on #HATEISAVIRUS earlier in the year, the magnitude of this campaign simply could not be understated. "2020 was probably the most important election year of our lifetime. It was important for UPRISERS to work on this campaign to collaborate with I AM A VOTER and get as many folks to vote!" Hanabusa said.

Hanabusa and her cutting-edge fashion line had the LA fashion scene buzzing with excitement. At this point, UPRISERS had already reached a deal to collaborate with PacSun in the future. At the conclusion of UPRISERS' campaigns for #2020Census and #Vote, Michelle had rounded up her list of celebrity collaborators for her company's upcoming drop with PacSun.

The Uprisers.World Collection Drops Today

The year 2020 was an emotional rollercoaster for people behind UPRISERS. They made waves in the fashion industry with their eye-catching designs and their grassroots marketing schemes. In the process of starting a revolution, they gained the support of celebrities and business owners of all ethnicities.

Within two months of its inception, #HATEISAVIRUS generated over 16 million impressions on social media, thus making it the most notable campaign of the year for UPRISERS. But the brand's true moment of affirmation came when they finalized a deal to work with PacSun. "From the very beginning, PacSun believed in UPRISERS' message and my views on being tasteful but radical at the same time," said Michelle K. Hanabusa.

When the business deal for this collaboration was finally made official, it marked a historic moment for the Asian American female-owned company. "I think that it's so cool

UPRISERS is going to break into PacSun…we deserve to be in the stores and not just in a store as an Asian product in supermarkets," said Tiffanie Marie. "This is something that's made by Asians and not just for Asians, but made by Asians for the world. Listen to us. Look at us. This is what's happening now. We're here. We're actually fucking here!"

The Uprisers.World Collection will feature contributions from an all-star lineup up of creatives including two familiar faces in Asia Jackson and NOHEMY. "Throughout this collection, I guess everything that represents NOHEMY is what represents UPRISERS as well," said the Puerto Rican native. "I think the thing we have in common is sending a message through art and in this case, it will be through the clothing line. When people see these images and the clothing line at the store, they're going to definitely feel an impact as soon as they walk in. I think what is dope about this is the diversity. Like I said, art brings people together by collaborating with different cultures from all around the world. It just shows that in union there's power."

UPRISERS has always been supported by an eclectic mix of people from every race — all over the world. It's in their message, it's in their educational content and it's in their clothing. And as of today, Feb. 18, 2021, their new collection is available online and in PacSun stores everywhere.

This independent streetwear brand would never have been able to reach so many people all across the globe without the dedication of their creative team. Together, they conquered 2020 in style, and now, nearly one year after being blindsided by the backlash from COVID-19, they have broken new ground with this partnership.

Shop the UPRISERS x PacSun collection here.

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