

From Boutique to Bulk Production



American-made apparel is struggling to get out of boutique mode. While made in USA clothing is culturally relevant, it is far from mainstream; 98 percent of apparel purchased in this country comes from abroad.

What we need is a new idea, something that extends our reach and connects us in the push towards apparel production that makes social, environmental and financial sense.

I asked Carol Engle-Enright, who works in the Department of Design and Merchandising at Colorado State University what she thought about American manufacturing closing that gap. Her response was quick and to the point. “We lost an entire generation of craftsmen,” she began, “We’ve focused on the fast

fashion part of the business and nobody is being trained for production.”

Carol went on to explain how she feels production details are being passed off; the expectation is someone else, somewhere down the road, is going to do it. “We’ve lost the innovation that comes with making product,” she said. “The production and designer conversation just isn’t there when the design team is never on the factory floor.”

Our conversation moved on to other aspects of making apparel. I wondered if CSU taught digital cutting, a particular gremlin that is holding up my small apparel making efforts in Denver. And while teaching digital patternmaking at the big school is okay, digital cutting? Not so

much. How about technical colleges? None she knew of. That goes for sewing machine mechanics or any other position in the apparel making chain except for fashion degrees.

Then Carol described a two-part solution.

“The University,” she began, “With its extension service, can go to any county that needs it and help teach people anything to do with sewing. They can train sewers or cutters or whatever there’s a need for. We have counties in Eastern Colorado that are ready to start training programs right now, but there has to be the demand before someone will commit the money.”

However, Carol sees a challenge to just opening up training centers in counties

and communities across Colorado. Americans don’t want to sit in rows with the machines front to back and line-sew. “Old school sewing is considered an ugly business, and we have to change that,” she said. Bingo, I thought, the same thing applies to my missing cutters and mechanics; the underlying stigma in our society is that apparel manufacturing is low class, dirty work. I believe the term is, ‘sweat-shop.’

Carol’s remedy is social: “If (they) could work differently; in circles, or groups, and be able to share their abilities and support one another... I know those women would compete and train themselves for quality.” Now here is where my head exploded. The support she was referring to extends well beyond the sewing floor. Working in America is difficult at best, and the pressure is on communities to find clean, stable jobs that knit their citizenry together. Secondly, the idea that quality is related to technical skill, which is an art we learn from one another, is brilliant. She was describing not a patch, but a new foundation to build an industry upon.

Her blueprint is our secret weapon; we’re stronger in small, independent groups. Carol rightly argues that if we can allow Americans to see themselves, and their lifestyles, reflected on the sewing floor; they won’t just produce, they will strive to be perfect. Carol has driven to the town hall meetings, and said the turnout can be overwhelming. “We had 60 women show up for one meeting,” she explained, “They could all sew.” And that was in a town of 1800 people. ●