

wear to be both cool and practical. "I'm restricted with the machinery that I use to produce this stuff and it slows down the process for me!"

"Yeah, I'm in the same boat," Laroux says, nodding. Her clothing at the Redoux Parlour, like shirtdresses and overalls, sells out faster than she can produce it. Laroux says that in the months leading up to Eugene Fashion Week or Oregon Country Fair, there are never enough hands or machines to manufacture her designs.

"There's a lot of people in the DIY fashion movement in Eugene that we know that basically are doing this as a side project. It's their art; it's their passion, but they have to hold down regular jobs to make ends meet. If there were resources like a fashion house, a production house, available to them, they could actually take it to the next step," Chester says. "They could start incorporating their art into a business. A lot of us who are spread so thin as designers, we're kind of at a stagnating state with the lack of this kind of resource available to us."

Chester and Laroux say the typical process for taking a design from idea to fruition is to make a prototype, tweak it, make another prototype, tweak it and so on until they have a product that both functions and looks the way they want it. For help with prototypes, some designers enlist contracted sewers, many of whom are in Salem, Portland or further afield.

"If you're having to run all the way up to Portland every time to look at something..." Laroux says.

"It's not sustainable," Chester adds. They both shake their heads.

Harding, founder of Circle Creations and co-owner of

the new Trillium boutique in south Eugene, is one of those designers. "I've been searching for more [sewers]. I have about three new designs right now that aren't done for the holidays, so I'm definitely behind on that," says Harding, who uses Cascade Commercial Cutting and Sewing in Salem for some of her designs. "There's nothing large scale in the area. It's definitely not convenient." Lee continues, "We kind of have a special niche in Eugene. We're kind of known along the West Coast that we have a lot of designers and really good clothing companies. So I think it would be a good fit to have a production facility here."

Two years ago, Chester, Laroux, Harding and over a dozen other local garment industry professionals began meeting with Leah Murray, a program coordinator at eDev, a local nonprofit organization that helps micro entrepreneurs reach their business goals through classes, counseling and small grants. Chester, Laroux, Harding and Breech have all used eDev to grow their businesses. Murray says that when Sew Unique, a former sewing outfit in Eugene, closed "it left a major hole in the community." So the group would discuss their business needs and a garment production house would always be at the top of the list. Murray advised them on possible avenues of funding — microloans, urban renewal funds from the city of Eugene and even Kickstarter. "They have roots here," says Murray of the designers. "Why should they have to leave?"

Breech, Trust Hemp founder and the other co-owner of Trillium, was also at those meetings. "This idea keeps coming back. It might be a critical mass moment," Breech says. The lack of access to local, reliable production for local designers has been a "major roadblock to success."

The Springfield Model

In late November, Mitra Chester and Laura Lee Laroux tour T&J Sewing in Springfield, a small production house that produces canvas tote and bike bags for companies like Archival Clothing. The windowless concrete building sits on Main Street, a complete mystery to the outside world. The only sign of occupancy is "T&J Sewing" hand-scrawled on the front door. Inside, is a cacophony of production: the buzz of straight-stitch and cover-stitch sewing machines, sergers (for hemming and seaming), grommet and snap machines and T&J's 10 employees fill the spotless 7,600-sq.-ft. space with activity. Spools of colorful thread line white shelves, sample bags dangle from hooks on the walls and a rack full of paper patterns flutter whenever someone walks by. After a walk-through of the facility, and lots of oohing and ahhhing over equipment by Chester and Laroux, the designer duo talk shop with Terry Shuck (the T of T&J) about what equipment they would need and how much it would cost to open a similar operation (Shuck ballparked \$200,000 — if the equipment is bought new).

"There's definitely a need for someone to do garments. Everybody who did garments here in the past is gone," says Shuck, who, along with his wife Julie (she's the J), has been in the production business for over 30 years, beginning with the Eugene-based Burley Design Cooperative, where they worked in cutting, designing, sewing and machine maintenance. When Burley changed its business model in the early aughts, the Shucks bought up most of their equipment and began a production outfit in their garage. Less than 10 years later, the business has tripled in size both physically (they moved into their third and biggest location in September 2012) and production-wise.

"I get calls all the time from people looking for someone to manufacture a specific garment. We've seen everything from slings and wraps to dresses and shirts. We specialize in what we're doing and this is what we stick with," Shuck says.

The Cost of Homegrown Couture

Chester and Laroux have approached the city with the idea of bringing manufacturing to town.

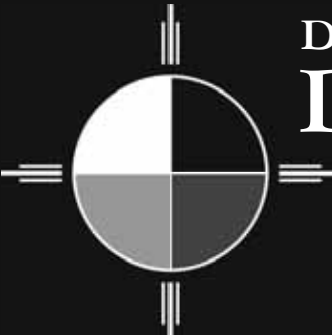
"Designers like Mitra and Laura Lee — that's part of the creative industry that we all want to have in our town," says Billie Moser, the community events manager for the city of Eugene's Cultural Services department. "We understand that there's a need, and that we need space like that. That doesn't mean we have found space like that ... but I have definitely talked to my colleagues about it and the reaction was very positive."

Before finding a viable space, local garment designer and production sewer Jeffrey Yee says a project like this would need a secure financial investment. "It's an undertaking to start a production house," Yee says. "I think it's a great idea, but can you pay for it? How are you going to pay for it? How are you going to get it off the ground?" If the project does find funding, Yee says he would be happy to step in to show designers and other potential employees



EMPLOYEE AT T&J SEWING

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