



Committed to ecology

MARTA SWAIN SEES CLOTHING AS ONE MORE WAY OF CONNECTING WITH NATURE — A PHILOSOPHY SHE LEARNED FROM HER PARENTS. **BY MARTY PRIMEAU**

Marta Swain

Company: Clothing Matters

Web site: www.clothingmatters.net

Community Involvement: WMEAC, West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, Local First, Green America. "And we partner with any nonprofits who are making a difference."

Marta Swain was having a blast. For two hours, the owner of Clothing Matters mingled with a group of high school girls inside her eco-fashion boutique in East Hills.

The teens, preparing for a spring fashion show, tried on garments made of hemp, bamboo, soy — even recycled polyester.

For Swain, 52, it was more than just an opportunity to sell some tops and skirts. It was a chance to teach kids about sustainability. And teaching is what Swain is all about.

"What is the impact of buying a T-shirt?" she asked, launching into a

tirade about the carcinogens and pesticides found in conventional cotton crops.

"Cotton was marketed to us as 'the fabric of our lives,'" Swain told the students. "It was supposed to be pure and natural. Instead, it was one of the most adulterated fibers."

So a dozen years ago, Swain made it her mission to offer green alternatives. Clothing Matters sells a variety of earth-friendly fibers — including organic cotton — from more than 35 manufacturers around the world. "We even have some local and regional designers," she said.

Her criteria: All must be committed to practices that are friendly to people and the planet.

Profile: Influential Women

"Feel this," she said, holding out the sleeve of a fleece hoodie, allowing the girls to ooh and aah at the softness. "Isn't it amazing? It's made from recycled bottles."

As the teens perused the shelves and racks, Swain walked around offering suggestions and comments. "After all these years," she said, smiling broadly, "I still get excited about what we offer."

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But it's not really about the fashion. Swain sees clothing as one more way of connecting with nature — a philosophy she learned from her parents, Mary and Robert Swain, who co-founded the West Michigan Environmental Action Council.

"At age 10, I understood more about the relevance of ecology than most adults," Swain said. She was the kid who started a recycled newspaper drive at Wealthy Elementary School. As a teenager, she interned at WMEAC.

Her passion for the arts and love of nature led her to the Rhode Island School of Design. "Good design is so inherent in nature," she said.

By 1980, she combined her interests and founded Interplay, workshops designed as "an interactive, creative learning process that taps human potential to inform, inspire, develop and sustain lives and communities, and to improve personal, social and ecological well-being."

She taught her sustainability principles to businesses and nonprofits, traveling around the world and living in cities throughout the United States.

"For 18 years, I engaged people in the observation, inquiry and interpretation of how we are all part of nature," she said. "And I realized that people everywhere really respond well to being part of the solution."

In 1994, she was living in Minnesota when she discovered the "ugly truth about cotton." Incensed, she remembers thinking, "Someone ought to do some-

thing. I just didn't think that someone would be me."

Swain had no interest in fashion — or retail. But she was darned if she was going to spend one more precious dollar on apparel that was polluting the earth. Her search for alternative fibers led her to a California company that was manufacturing hemp clothing.

Though industrial hemp is grown around the world because it's durable and earth-friendly, the U.S. government outlawed it in 1936 because it comes from the same plant as marijuana.

But Swain didn't shy away from the association. She moved back to Grand Rapids in 1998 and opened Hemp Goods, a 350-square-foot clothing store in Easttown.

Within a year, she was ready to expand.

"We were in a great location on Lake, in a wonderful little mall that we shared with a place that made custom cabinets, and a juice bar." But she had to move when the building was renovated to make way for a new CVS Pharmacy.

"With the help of customers, we moved across the street behind Wolfgang's," Swain said. "Even though we had zero visibility, there was a lot of word of mouth about us. We even had customers driving from Chicago."

She also changed the store's name to Clothing Matters, realizing that many people "didn't discern the difference between hemp and marijuana."

Three years ago, the store moved to its current location 141 Diamond Ave. SE, across the street from Marie Catrib's. Through the years, her inventory and her customer base have expanded. Now she's hoping to establish a partnership "to take this business to the next level." She's also writing about her experiences through the years.

"My first love still is education," she said. "I want to take what I've learned and share it with others." **GR**

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