

Clothing Matters

Community Spotlight

by Amanda Merritt



Have you ever considered how the production of your favorite T-shirt or pair of jeans affects our environment and other people's lives? Every product that leaves a store has an impact that consumers are often inadvertently oblivious to.

This year's ArtPrize includes a collaborative piece about compassion in a "book" hanging at Central District Cyclery, 52 Monroe Center Street. One of the 2' x 3' pages has images and information from a simple search about how apparel production impacts people and our planet. It invites viewers to regard the interdependent nature of life, while considering an everyday, up close and personal dimension of life still left out of most sustainability conversations.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity to shed some light on how our clothes are tangible threads that connect us to other lives, communities and ecosystems directly affected by our choices," explains artist, educator and entrepreneur Marta Swain, founder of Clothing Matters in Grand Rapids. Her ArtPrize piece illustrates effects of a historically unaccountable apparel industry's fast, "throwaway" fashion, fueled by an abundance of cheap and irresponsibly manufactured clothing.

Since 1996, Clothing Matters has helped well over forty thousand people prevent pollution, conserve resources and promote social justice. Featuring a world-class collection of responsibly manufactured apparel unmatched even in cosmopolitan cities like San Francisco, London or Paris, Clothing Matters has raised the bar for people who travel from near and far to invest treasured dollars in apparel they can both feel good in and feel good about.

"People who care to know more about what they put on their precious bodies can be part of the solution by making more conscious choices," says Swain. "We serve a diverse and discerning clientele of all ages and backgrounds who choose to be part of the apparel solution, compelled by even small bits of knowledge about how their dollars can be invested in ways that respect people and the planet."

A simple search of "how apparel manufacturing impacts personal, social and ecological health" reveals sobering realities, of which a small percentage can prompt choices that support social justice and reduce pollution including carcinogenic chemicals, pesticides, bleach, formaldehyde, heavy metal dyes, sizing, detergents and fabric softeners. Mississippi and Louisiana's Pearl River, the denim manufacturing capital of the world, supported civilizations for millennia and is now among many ecosystems destroyed by production of items that quickly add to landfills and incinerators around the world.

Swain believes, "People deserve to know and be encouraged to inquire about what their dollars do." Retail manufacturing is the second most polluting industry on earth, next to oil. Every product that leaves a store impacts people and the planet in countless ways to which most people are oblivious. According to statistics from the Technical Textile Markets, the fashion industry's rising demand for man-made fibers, especially polyester,

has nearly doubled in the last 15 years. Energy intensive manufacturing

processes require large amounts of crude oil and releases toxic emissions including volatile organic compounds, particulate matter and acid gases such as hydrogen chloride, all of which can cause or heighten respiratory diseases for underpaid textile workers and others. Producing the most up-to-date fashion as fast as possible for as cheap as possible comes at an immeasurably high price.



Clothing Matters partners with local, regional domestic and international designers, including co-operatives and third party certified facilities, who demonstrate commitment to practices and policies that exceed Fair Labor Organization standards. In 2011, Clothing Matters more than tripled sales of products designed and handmade in Michigan. In addition to meeting sustainability requirements, benefits of Clothing Matters' world class collection of sustainably manufactured apparel include making it easier than ever to get dressed, look better and be more comfortable--all while managing less clothing!

Swain confidently asks customers to consider how an item in her store that interests them can take the place of two, three, four or more, while generating a better return on investment with extreme comfort and satisfaction throughout the seasons. Clothing Matters offers a unique collection for the concerned consumer looking to support conscious commerce with apparel choices that improve personal, social and ecological well-being, one article of clothing at a time.



For more information on how you can make an impact through your apparel choice, experience Clothing Matters at 141 Diamond SE, Grand Rapids, or visit www.ClothingMatters.net. See ad page 13.

Amanda Merritt is a recent graduate of Cornerstone University with a degree in Communication Arts and Journalism/Public Relations. You can contact her at mandi.merritt@hotmail.com.