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They're not just clothes — they're 'wearable art'

Clothesline fest to put success story on display

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When the going gets tough, the tough get creative.

After weathering three less-than-stellar years as a clothing designer, Lisa Saether is rejuvenated, having recently opened a retail shop and branching out into e-tailing at www.lasaether.com.

"It forced me to come up with new ideas," Saether said. "I am infused again."

A regular at shows such as this weekend's Clothesline Arts Festival and the Corn Hill Arts Festival, Saether, 50, has been selling her L.A. Saether line of cotton clothing since 1987. That's when she borrowed \$5,000 from her father to launch her business full time. She had worked at the business part time since 1984.

Saether paid back the loan with interest. By 2001, she was selling 5,000 garments a year, mostly through arts shows in Rochester and the affluent Tri-State suburbs in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

At her Bluff Point, Yates County, home and studio overlooking Keuka Lake, Saether worked on her latest fall line — whimsical silk-screened clothing — which will debut at Clothesline. She is trying some new looks and colors this season, such as ponchos with circles around the sun, and designs in colors such as teal and burgundy.

Saether attributes much of her newfound success to word-of-mouth and new marketing strategies such as the retail shop and her Web site, which allows her clients to make purchases throughout the year. Her retail shop, next to her home, attracts visitors from the wine region.

Saether uses her own, 6-foot-2, size 16 frame as a model for her clothing. Prices range from \$38 for a silk screened scarf to \$86 for a long cardigan emblazoned with designs.

"It's wearable art that fits and flatters," Saether said. "This has always been about my lifestyle. It's about making things I want to wear."

Saether has developed a loyal clientele who buy from her each season.

Ann Pfeiffer, 52, a Rochester City Court judge, has been buying Saether's clothing for a decade.

"I wear some to work, I wear it for play," Pfeiffer said. "There are always days when you choose comfort over high fashion. It's nice to know you have some Lisa Saether clothes."

There are now more than 3,300 customers on Saether's mailing list, which she also uses to advertise trunk shows.

She uses trunk shows because the cost of vending at art shows has climbed tremendously, Saether said. Hotel rooms near major cities are now more than \$100, and there are entry fees for the shows.

Saether tries to keep her costs down — so she can keep her prices down — by staying at hotels with microwaves so she can cook her own meals.

Marketing through the Internet and word-of-mouth are key to a small business' success, said Carmen Powers, a marketing professor at Monroe Community College.

Saether has tapped into a good demographic for her line of clothing, Powers said, noting that companies such as Chico's and Eileen Fisher have expanded their businesses by offering clothes with simple, flexible sizing that are trendy and timeless.

To stay motivated to create new designs twice a year, Saether spends time every day in nature. From those walks in the woods come drawings that become inspirations for her final designs. "Art for me has always been about the process of creating, the space you create from and the flow you get into," Saether said.

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