

Oreland expert offers course in making high fashion at home

Springfield Sun>News
By Kaitlyn Linsner

High-end fashion often seems unobtainable for those who may not have the means to make such lavish purchases, or may not know where to even start looking for the right-fitting garments.

What may seem even more outlandish than buying clothes from high-end designers is having the knowledge and skills to make those clothes at home with minimal equipment.

In Oreland, classes teaching exactly that are being offered by Laurel Hoffmann, a professional pattern maker who has run multiple clothing factories in Philadelphia.

“Give me a garment, and I know how to take patterns off it, know how to sew to make an exact replica of that garment and sew it back together so you do not know which is which,” Hoffmann said. “Thousands of people are out there ready to draw pretty pictures but do not know how to do the work. My program is about how to do the work.”

The six-course program, which will be held at Holy Martyr’s Church, 120 Allison Road, was once offered at Fabrics on the Hill in Chestnut Hill and in the continuing professional schools at two Philadelphia universities, where Hoffmann taught and tested her program in the classroom for about 20 years. Her firsthand knowledge of fashion technology, combined with her teaching experience, also helped her write multiple instruction books used for the courses, including one titled “Design Room Techniques,” which has been in the works for 25 years.

She sent the book to Hong Kong last week to be reviewed by Jane Singer, publisher of professional fashion magazine “Inside Fashion.”

“I’m teaching it as if you are walking into the design department and being taught right on the job,” she said, adding that the courses can be taken by anyone as long as they know how to sew two piles of fabric together without jamming their sewing machine.

“It is hands-on, and you can do it in your home. The more expensive the garment, the less equipment you need. You do not need computerized sewing machines. The machine I use was manufactured about 1948. That is the one I use all the time.”



Hoffmann lives in Oreland but grew up on a tomato farm South Jersey, where she learned basic sewing techniques because her family lived at least five miles from anything, she said. She would watch the men in her family build and fix machinery and observe the low-level engineering techniques that she would later use in her fashion career.

She studied journalism at Syracuse University, but when she could no longer attend, her mother suggested she take fashion design at what is now the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

“At the time a lot of things were not really open to women. This seemed like a good thing to do. They [university] had one of the best programs in the world, but they did not have anyone signing up. All were taking home economics, not fashion design, so they dropped the program,” she said. “At that point I said I wanted to be in fashion, and I wound up working in the industry and learned it there. I was very fortunate that I could have people on the job train me and that is where I really learned this.”

Of the three fields in the fashion industry, retail, design and technology, fashion technology has not been written down step-by-step, which is Hoffmann’s approach to her program. She said having pattern making, what is now called technical designer skills, prompted people she worked for to tell her she will always have a job in the fashion industry.

“In the industry I did the works. At the time I could not sew on sewing machines because they were union shops, but I learned from the sample makers anyway,” she said. “I know home sewing and sample making, and I use sample making procedures because it is so much better. That information is not out there, and I’m looking at a market and saying it needs to be out there. High-end garments come from knowing sample making.”

Reprinted with permission of the Springfield Sun.

Hoffmann also talked about the possible resurgence of clothing manufacturing in Philadelphia. If factories do in fact pop up again, she said, those interested in working in the fashion industry need to know what she is teaching.

Learning the techniques also produces better quality clothing and saves money, she said.

“If you know the best colors and styles for you and you are selective with what you buy with fabrics and then you make the garment, you look terrific,” she said. “It’s worth taking the time to make something really nice because in the end you are going to make one garment instead of buying five or six and it is going to look better than any of the others. You wind up saving time and money if you use high-end methods.”

Those interested in enrolling in Hoffmann’s program can pick and choose which courses they would like to take. Some require prerequisites, others do not, but all include her course textbooks with step-by-step diagrams and instruction.

Hoffmann demonstrates and teaches all industry basics such as drafting, grading and sewing procedures and also introduces students to fashion design by educating them on personal color analysis.

Her course, “Drafting and Fitting Pants and Skirts,” starts Jan. 21, lasts nine weeks and does not require a prerequisite. The course costs \$325, and Hoffmann said students have traveled from Washington, D.C., and Harrisburg to take it in the past.

“Everyone gets dressed without thinking about it, or you do not think about it as much as I do,” she said. “This is your personal statement to the world of who you are. You are telling people all about you when you put your clothes on.”

For more information visit www.LaurelHoffmann.com or call 215-884-7065.