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WORK SPACE

Fashion incubator aims to be a one-stop for new designers

By [Katie Johnston](#) Globe Staff, October 27, 2019, 7:21 p.m.

As a young fashion designer in Philadelphia, Donielle McKeever got a crash course in the laborious process of turning a sketch into a piece of clothing. She had to find contractors and manufacturers that could create patterns, adjust those patterns to make different sizes, and sew each skirt or blouse or dress. McKeever often had to use different factories for different types of clothing and place minimum orders far beyond what she was confident she could sell.

The process was so complex that at times she wondered if she was being taken advantage of, even unintentionally.

McKeever eventually started her own clothing factory in New Jersey, then moved on to consulting when she had her son, now 5, helping designers with production and development.

In January, McKeever put all this experience under one roof to open ThreadTech, a factory and fashion incubator housed in a 7,000-square-foot space in an old cotton mill in East Boston. McKeever considers it a “one-stop shop” that provides designers with everything they need to go from concept to distribution. No more hunting down multiple contractors to take on different parts of the process. No more hiring one factory — likely overseas — to make pants, and another to make shirts.

“This is a way to really give a home base to someone starting out,” said McKeever, 39, who also serves as a mentor and adviser to new designers.

On a recent day in the fashion incubator space, Lowell designer Antoinette Indge was steaming a blouse as a photographer took pictures of a model wearing one of the hand-sewn tunics in her Cinderloop line.

Nearby, Somerville designer Maureen Barillaro was working on her laptop at a drafting table. A few pieces from her I Love My Nighty line of fitted loungewear hung on a rack beside her, including a shin-length nightgown with a hood and pockets made of ultra-soft botanical fibers.

“Women live in their hoodies,” said Barillaro, who started her line because she wanted to get out of the “frump slump” and relax in something more flattering than sweats or “granny gowns” on cold winter nights.

Barillaro, who is in discussion with ThreadTech about producing her nightgowns, is among the incubator’s 10 members, paying \$175 a year for access to monthly events (guest speakers include an Instagram specialist and a luxury brand investor) and discounts on the use of industrial sewing machines, photo studio space, and training sessions and workshops.

“Think of it as a WeWork for designers,” said Thom Laub, vice president of sales.

Sun streamed through the massive windows, illuminating the white walls, exposed ductwork, and concrete floors. Couches, chairs, and plants formed a sitting area behind the reception desk, with gourds arranged on coffee tables. Lime green accents were everywhere: pillows, magazine holders, chairs in a small conference room. A humidifier on the windowsill pumped out steam.

Designers can store their gear in lockers, help themselves to scissors, needles, and industrial dress forms. Six Juki sewing machines can be rented out — \$14.99 for four hours for members, \$19.99 for nonmembers — including one especially for hems and seams and another for zigzag stitching.

Through a set of swinging doors marked “Employees Only,” four women were working in the sunny, high-ceilinged factory with massive windows overlooking Route 1A and the Mystic River — the opposite of a sweatshop setting. Two were at sewing machines, another was ironing a piece of fabric, while a fourth made measurements at a drafting table. The room was quiet except for the chatter of sewing machines.

Sheer black bras and underwear, designed by a MassArt graduate, hung on hangars. Another rack held a row of muslin patterns for skirts and pants made by a Puma-funded designer.

The factory's eight employees make patterns and samples and sew clothes for a handful of clients, who range from individual designers to apparel companies. Instead of requiring clients to order 50 or 100 or even 300 of each item, ThreadTech doesn't set a minimum, and will take on most types of apparel, except jeans, T-shirts, and baseball caps. The price is competitive with overseas factories because there are no tariffs or shipping container costs, McKeever said.

Designers can also use ThreadTech to handle packaging, warehousing, and shipping — whether it's an individual online order or sending 5,000 pieces to Nordstrom.

In one corner of the factory sits the key to the whole operation: an 8-foot-long \$40,000 Gerber plotter connected to a computer and a digitizer board. A pattern, usually hand-made, is scanned in to create a digital version. The system can also create digital 3-D models that allow designers to see the pattern from all angles and adjust it accordingly. Next, a pattern is generated in different sizes and laid out in a “jigsaw puzzle” to optimize the amount of fabric used, then printed out on a 72-inch piece of paper.

McKeever is in the process of raising \$1.25 million to bring in more sewing machines, drafting tables, and laser cutters, and hopes to ramp up to 30 employees by next year. She has her sights set on opening a ThreadTech in New York in 2021, and hopes to expand to other cities, too.

As far as McKeever knows, hers is the only such operation of its kind, and she believes it can have a major impact.

“I'm going to disrupt this industry,” she said.

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