

Profile LuAnn Heyer (September 2016)

LuAnn Heyer may not have always known she'd end up with the career she has now.

But, in some ways, perhaps she was destined to find it.

The Faribault resident was working for the Faribault Woolen Mill Co. in the late 1980s when she began her career with wool – at first making stuffed sheep, bunnies and other critters for the company.

“That was the kickoff,” she said, reflecting on her early beginnings in the industry.

Heyer said she's been a sewer for much of her life, exposed to the skill at a young age by her grandmothers who either made clothes for their grandchildren or sewed in their presence. Her grandmothers' influence would come into play again down the road.

It was later in life that Heyer really started working with wool, eventually finding her calling. Over the course of several years, her product line grew in popularity while she was still working for the mill and expanded from her classic stuffed animals to include items like mittens, vests, scarves, pillows, hats and her signature coats.

Heyer's business took off so well that she went into production full-time, finally moving into a space of her own in 1996.

She was encouraged to start her own business by the Faribault Woolen Mill Co., Heyer said. She still often uses the mill's products in her own work.

Heyer opened doors at 739 Willow Street in Faribault and called the business “Annie Belle Creations,” named after the grandmothers who instilled a passion for the skill in her years before. She recently celebrated 20 years of making garments from wool and keeping her customers warm and fashionable.

The allure of wool

The crafter, who has lived in Faribault for much of her life, said she strives to make things that customers will want to keep forever. Because wool is such a reliable, strong material, it's possible for someone to purchase her products and use them for years to come.

“Wool products are so resistant,” she said. “Wool breathes. You can wear it all year round.”

Not all of the material found inside Heyer's shop is wool (she uses fleece, too, among other things) but the majority of it is locally sourced, which is a driving factor for her passion, she said.

“I'm passionate about using sustainable goods,” she said. “I do like to recycle.”

That's why Heyer uses scrap pieces to create smaller things like coffee koozies and cell phone cases. Every piece has a purpose.

Heyer makes customizable things, too.

Sometimes customers will purchase blankets they like at Faribault Woolen Mill Co. and bring the material to Heyer to make a garment.

About the products

Heyer said she's made a point to create a “warm, fuzzy” atmosphere inside her store.

Shoppers will find a wide assortment of products inside the shop, including capes – often a lightweight, but warm, split-front garment that drapes over the shoulders – hats, mittens, vests and her specialty: coats.

The crafter said she usually allows herself about a day to make a coat from start to finish (she developed the pattern herself). The project begins with a blanket, which is then transformed into a wearable coat. Pieces can look completely different: a rich assortment of hues, collars and buttons are just some of the variations. Sizes include small, medium or large, although Heyer said she could also create custom sizes.

“They are works of art – wearable art,” Heyer said of her creations, adding that each finished product is unique.

Some customers turn to Heyer to transform heirlooms into wearable pieces. People will bring her blankets they've had in their families for years, requesting they be turned into a coat.

Fashion is always changing, and Heyer said she keeps on top of upcoming trends with her work. One of her favorite products is a multi-purpose vest that can turn into a cape, something she referred to as “adorable.”

Of course, you can also find her traditional stuffed animals (where her passion first bloomed) inside the store.

An uncommon service

The businesswoman said she has found that people will travel far to purchase her products, including one woman from Bloomington who has purchased 17 coats from Annie Belle Creations over the years for herself and family members.

Heyer has busily prepared all summer for autumn when temperatures start to drop and customers seek out warm clothing to get them through the colder months. Fall is always a busy season, she said.

She credits her success and ability to stay afloat in an era where so many people turn to the Internet to do their shopping to tools like social media and word of mouth.

Heyer posts photographs and videos of newly completed garments to the business' Facebook page, "Annie Belle Creations." It's not uncommon for a piece to be finished and sold within the same day.

The business is also on Pinterest, where photos of pieces like pocket purses, mittens, capes and blanket coats can be found. Search "Annie Belle Creations" to find her page.

You can also find Annie Belle Creations online at anniebellecreations.com.

Rachel Minske is a multimedia journalist. When not writing, she's usually drinking coffee and asking questions.