



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

## NEXT-GEN BLOG:

### **Hands-on aspect of textile industry felt right at a young age**

*Editor's note: Each month, SEAMS gives our younger members the opportunity to share their thoughts on their experiences in the industry. This blog gives the next generation – who in the near future will serve in leadership positions and guide the direction of the association – a larger voice and platform NOW and will help them engage more the entire SEAMS' membership while busting stereotypes.*

**By Hannah Rich Orlowski  
Product Development Engineer  
Contempora Fabrics**

You always hear stories of people “falling into textiles.” but I knew I wanted to be a textile engineer when I was 16 years old. As a rising senior, I knew I wanted to be an engineer, but I just wasn’t sure what type.

My mom sent me to every engineering summer camp NC State offered, to help me figure it out. I did industrial, material science, chemical and finally the Summer Textile Exploration Program (STEP). When my STEP guide demonstrated how firefighter gear is tested by turning on a ton of flamethrowers that shot fire at a mannequin wearing turnout gear, I knew textiles was the industry for me.

In addition to being blown away by “Pyromani,” I love that the textile industry is so hands-on. Everything we work on is so tangible. You can touch, feel and see the quality of everything from fiber to finished fabric. There aren’t many industries that have this luxury. You can’t physically touch numbers, or a supply chain, or a process. And now as the Product Development Engineer for Contempora Fabrics, my entire job revolves around touching real fabrics, breaking them down, and then recreating them in our own way.

Though I have only been at Contempora for just under two years, I already know that it is my home. As a Gen Z, it is amazing to find a company that is so willing to give employees flexibility in schedule, location, involvement and so much more.

Pre-pandemic, I don’t think my hybrid position would have even been considered an option, but now there are more and more opportunities for people to find their own dream job regardless of location. I understand that not all positions can be remote and that I am privileged enough to have such a position. The pandemic has certainly opened the door for hybrid work wide open, but the need for 100% in-person work is still necessary.



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In terms of enticing more Gen Z folks to these types of positions, I feel it's important to expose them to the intricacies of manufacturing positions. To do this, Contempora has participated in the Rural Works Internship program in conjunction with NC State University's College of Engineering. This program incentivizes engineering students to intern at companies in rural areas of North Carolina. During the summer, we give them an education on not only how knit products are made and how a business operates, but also how it's often on us to create new fabrics to show to brands – not the other way around.

Showing my generation that the innovation can actually happen at a mill level instead of in an office is, in my opinion, a big part of the drawing and keeping more of us in the industry.

I feel very lucky to have found a company that not only has a great work environment but also to have a long history in the industry. In addition to being a 100% employee-owned company, Contempora just celebrated our 50-year anniversary in July of this year.

When I first decided to pursue textiles, I received a lot of comments surrounding the huge shift of textile production overseas. Would I even be able to find a job in the U.S.? Knowing that Contempora has been around for 50 years not only proves that the textile industry can be very strong in the States, but it also allows me to learn from mentors that have been in the industry for almost that long. My degree did an excellent job giving me the technical knowledge to understand the products and processes in our industry, but the opportunity to be mentored by those who have done it for 30+ years is even more valuable.

I know I'll never be able to soak up every bit of knowledge, but I am grateful to be surrounded by industry experts every day. I can only hope that one day it will be me mentoring the next generation.

In my short tenure at Contempora, I have already learned so many things and many of my attitudes, opinions and habits have changed. For example, I can no longer look at a \$2.99 price tag of a t-shirt and not absolutely question how it was made. On the flip side, I look at the hefty price tags of some "Made In the USA" garments that I never would have purchased previously and have absolutely no problem paying that amount. I can buy an expensive pair of jeans knowing that I'm not only paying for the quality of the jeans, but also the fair pay for the employees who made them, the sustainably sourced raw material, the water treatment of effluent from dyeing and finishing and many more intangible costs.

"Made in the USA" used to just mean that I was paying extra for that garment to be made by a U.S. citizen. That was nice and all, but didn't incentivize me in the least to choose it over a cheaper import product. Now, I understand that it's not only **who** is making your product, but **how** your product is made that is a part of that price and meaning behind "Made in the USA."



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Being a part of the SEAMS organization is a great way for us to network with other U.S.-based companies so we can develop relationships and propagate the drive for more “Made in the USA” programs. As a young woman in textiles, SEAMS is also a great way to meet other women in textiles and hopefully grow our community! I look forward to attending many more SEAMS events in a post-COVID world and networking with many of you in years to come!