



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

Designing the Future

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By: Xochil Herrera Scheer

The Chicago Pattern Maker

www.xochil.com

It's conference season!

Excuse me, but when is it NOT conference season around here?

One of the surprising things I was delighted to find out about our industry because it is constantly evolving and moving, is that there is plenty of new information and insightful conversations to be shared. My friends and colleagues are what I would lovingly describe as "lifelong learners." The educational opportunities never stop, and that's an amazing and wonderful thing.

On the flip side, I find it interesting that we seem to miss a lot of early exposure and experiences for those not yet in our industry, and could do a better job reaching those who don't even know about us, and sharing the vast opportunities that exist.

Having spoken to many different groups of people, ranging from industry professionals at trade shows and conferences, to high school and college students, to youth groups like Girl Scouts and creative arts summer camps, I've shared aspects of my own journey in a variety of ways.

This month, I was asked to address a new audience – high school educators – with the context of helping them to realize potential career paths and opportunities that they could share with their students, and also help prepare them for these pathways. Stimulated by this prospect, I was eager to reflect a bit more deeply into my past, and specifically how various teachers, classes, situations and opportunities have shaped who I am today. Each of us is the sum of our varied experiences, and that's hard to duplicate. However, I found through polling colleagues that we shared similar interests and experiences from our youth. How exciting to find there might be a bit of a "recipe" for finding someone with an aptitude for a similar path!

What incredible gifts I was given towards my future, with teachers who cared deeply about not only my learning outcome for the class, but for me as a person. In middle school, I was introduced to "tech ed," which was sort of a generalized class that tried to cover a lot of ground – from CNC wood cutting to make race cars, to designing a space helmet using paper-mâché.

In high school, these classes evolved to include things like aviation flight simulators and architectural drafting – both by hand and using a 3D computer program called AutoCAD. While I was trying my hand at creating walls and cylinders in CAD, I wondered how cool it would be if I could somehow draw a 3D model of a mannequin. Unfortunately, 3D fashion design tools



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were decades in the future, but I did some research and presented my teacher with a program that would work with AutoCAD to import 2D patterns that I could play with and modify. He managed to get it purchased for me and that was pretty awesome.

During this time, I was also learning Adobe Photoshop and InDesign for the yearbook club (which I later led as Editor my senior year); and mostly kept up my sewing passion on the side, making myself outfits for school dances, or creating pieces for family and friends. Having learned that skill at a young age, and having a lot of practice already, I felt much too advanced for the single sewing class my high school offered. However, I found out about my local community college offerings, and enrolled in an adult continuing education course in the evening, learning more advanced sewing and pattern manipulations. I couldn't even drive myself to class yet ... but my mom signed off on it, and I absolutely loved it.

I shared this experience with my guidance counselor the following fall, and she told me about a program that my high school had with the community college, where I could take more classes and the school district would pay for it. Amazing. I decided to drop my more grueling courses (AP economics, looking at you) and skip sports my senior year, and instead spent two half days a week taking advanced sewing and pattern drafting classes. It absolutely gave me the incredible leg up that, alongside my courses for my bachelor's degree after this, gave me an unparalleled foundation to build from. This is hardly the end of the story, but I think it was a pivotal time in my life, where I realized I could take this passion and turn it into something more serious.

I share this intimate recollection with you, as some insight into who I am, and to perhaps inspire your own introspection of your journey. Who in your life, and what happened, along the way, to shape who YOU are?

There are many examples of dual track educational opportunities around the country, and in various fields or areas of interest. It's common to see tracks designed for healthcare careers, construction trades, automotive and advanced manufacturing, among others. I would love to learn about and see this type of educational path in textiles and sewn products manufacturing; and expand upon potential apprenticeship programs that exist. That may be a taller order than most of us can swallow; but what we CAN all do is visit schools as a speaker or open up your doors for a tour; network with educators in your area to help them understand your current challenges and what you are looking for in your future workforce.

Think forward – don't just talk to older high school and college students, but reach out to middle schools, too. Those early experiences can sometimes be hard to tell if they're actually interested or not, but they've got to be exposed to know one way or another. I definitely believe those early problem-solving activities, including making a wooden racecar and fashioning a helmet from a balloon and paper, working through different design challenges, helped to inspire me on some level to go into product development. The younger generations Z and Alpha are looking for that same spark, and it's up to us to light the way.

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