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Focusing on the Future

Celebrating its 30th anniversary,
Design Knit continues to build on its legacy

Celebrating your 30th year in a remarkably successful business, you would think it might be time for some self-satisfied reflection on the past. Sitting on laurels, is not, however, how things are done at Design Knit, the Los Angeles-based, family owned manufacturer of knit-to-order textiles. The focus is firmly on the future.

How optimistic is Design Knit's CEO, Shala Tabassi? Her company recently took over the next building, adding approximately 50,000 square feet to the production and distribution facility. With the extra space comes the ability to "bring more and more machinery," Shala says, adding greater capacity to a mill already humming.

Since its initial days in a 900-square-foot office on Santee Street, selling jersey, french terry, interlock and baby rib, Design Knit has developed into a full-scale, onsite knitting operation, producing high-quality sheer to heavyweight fabrics in its Staunton Avenue mill.

The fact that domestic textile manufacturing exists "is really shocking for people to digest," says Shala's daughter, Pat Tabassi, the company's head of product development. It is increasingly rare. Companies that started going overseas for fabrics appear to be learning the significant benefits of shopping local. "Big companies have an interest in production here," Shala says. "We have always believed in the idea of 'made in USA goods.' We're working hard to strengthen that goal."

Pat elaborates, "A lot of customers who dabbled in overseas production have either come back or want to come back to the United States." The advantages are self-evident: more involvement in the creative process, better quality control, faster turnaround— "all of that is a big plus for doing business here," Pat says. "Our customers realize that at the end of the day, they prefer to have someone here to work with them instead of feeling disconnected."

As domestic traffic picks up, Design Knit is poised to offer its very particular kind of service, an intensely personal, hands-on approach that underlies not only its relationship with its clients but its entire design process. Design Knit, a Supima Licensee, also works closely with fiber and yarn producers such as Lenzing and Buhler with a large emphasis on quality and innovation.

Using a variety of yarns, including Supima cotton, Micro Modal, Tencel, linen, wool, cashmere and silk blends, to name a few, the fabric possibilities are endless. "We go above and beyond to create fashion forward and unique designs," adds Pat.

In the meeting room with a large picture window overlooking the mill, Design Knit's think tank comes to the table. Shala is Design Knit's guiding force. A physicist by training with an eye for design, she is deeply attuned to the technical aspects of fabric manufacturing. For the past nine years, she has worked side

by side with Pat, sharing her knowledge and passion for the industry.

Along with sales representatives Sarvey Tahmasebi Rector and Jennifer Menranvary, the group of four are the design and development team. Just about anything can spur ideas for a new fabric. For example, Pat pulls out a photo of a rippling sea and then a piece of the delicately wavy fabric the photo inspired.

The project at the moment is the Spring/Summer 2017 collection, at least 40 new fabrics that will debut at the LA Textile show. They go to great lengths to create a theme and decorate the booth. Design Knit produces collections two to three times a year, but new additions come in regularly.

When the team is together, there is a "synergy," Pat says, "but we're all different. We build on our differences—that's why there's so much variety in the line. I love that it is so diverse."

A fabric sample is discussed and debated, with everyone encouraged to put in her thoughts. Shala serves as the proud mentor, always allowing the rest of the team to run with their ideas. Some work, some don't, but it is always a learning experience for the next generation.

"Our collection is a sounding board for our client base," Pat explains. "It may inspire something, or they will want to tweak it. We can build on it. We are able to quickly, one on one change and produce a new sample to see if their concept can come to fruition."

The close proximity of the mill to many of Design Knit's clients makes it easy for true collaborations to take place. Mehranvary and Rector meet with clients regularly, often several times a day. Clients may have their own ideas or want to elaborate on Design Knit's samples. "You won't get that service with an overseas supplier," Pat points out. "It's a huge benefit." "We like to be involved with all of it," Shala goes on, "from the beginning of the fabric process to the end. We are not only selling fabric; we enjoy seeing what the final product looks like."

Shala's expertise helps guide clients through the development process. Whether it's a question regarding technicalities, price point or design. "It's not just having the knowledge but our willingness to share it," Pat explains, that drives their customers' loyalty. "It's why we partner with them. We always try to offer at least an alternative. It's our role to let the customers know they are not limited and work together to achieve their final goal."

With this 30th anniversary, "we are all in awe, in a sense," Pat says in a contemplative moment. "I feel it is quite an accomplishment, when there aren't a lot of local textile mills left. Shala has built it to what it is today, and she'd love to see it continue forward."

"I've had the best mentor," says Pat, "and we want to keep that legacy alive." "I am very proud and grateful, and that's why we continue," Shala says. "I am looking forward to many years to come."