

## SHE KEEPS OUTDOOR GEAR IN STITCHES

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*Penny Schwyn can get your outdoor gear in gear.*

To succeed in repairing and altering gear for fussy outdoors people, you must know your job inside and out.

That's why Penny Schwyn recently spent three days setting up and crawling through 11 arctic tents used by a Spokane company before she made a stitch on her sewing machine.

"I had to peel off duct tape and sort through the field repairs," she said. "I patched some things right then and marked the major repairs that needed to be done on a machine."

This was all in a day's work for a stay-at-home mom who has a small business and a long history in making and repairing outdoor gear.

Schwyn has been sewing for nearly 30 years and she's only 37. She worked for Mountainsmith, a pack company based in Golden, Colo., in the early 1980s.

"I was in on the company's transition from a garage to its first location," she said. "At that time, I was the company's Jill of all trades."

Later, she worked for an upscale bridal and custom sewing shop.

Outdoors people "are a lot less stressed out than brides, but they're just as demanding about their clothing," Schwyn said. She works in a basement room with two sewing machines and one industrial upholstering machine. Penny could be worth gold to people who need custom designs, alterations or repairs.

"One skier asked me to take six inches out of the arms and legs of a powder suit," she said. "He'd already paid \$300 to \$400 for it, but he can't find anything off the rack that fits. He's thrilled to pieces. Paying extra for alterations to get something that fits is well worth the added cost to some people."

Another frequent request comes from people who want custom Gore-Tex pants.

"Either they want me to copy a style they really like but can no longer find, or they want something simpler with no bells and whistles to add cost and weight, or maybe their body is just hard to fit." She admits her services aren't what some people would consider cheap.

"I see myself as a professional," she said. "People who go to a service offered by dry cleaners might get some work done for less, but those sewers don't know what the gear is for or they might not know the materials."

"If climbers say they need reinforcements in their pant legs where their crampons keep ripping holes, I know what they're talking about."

Costs range from under \$12 for minor repairs to \$20 for replacing jacket zippers and \$50-\$80 for major ski suit alterations.

"Most zipper repairs don't need a replacement, just a new slider," she said. "That's simple and cheap."

Work in progress at her table included replacing pack straps, altering ski clothing, repairing tents and making custom fleece clothing.

She also was working on a prototype for a locking storage bag the Mount Spokane Ski Patrol could use for their chair lift rescue ropes.

"They need something they can leave out and lock so jokers won't steal the carabiners," she said.

Some people look to a custom sewer simply because they can't part with gear that has so many memories.

"A friend had an old Omnipotent - the first Gore-Tex tent," she said. "The panels were worn and mildewy. Early Winters offered to give her a replacement, but they don't make the Omnipotent any more and that's the one she wanted. So I'm replacing some of the panels."

Despite her business and making all of her family's fleece garments, Schwyn still finds time to sew for fun. "When I've been hauling tents around and working with heavy stuff, it's a pleasure to work on quilts," she said, agreeing that it's much like writing poetry after working on a thesis all day.

With a little care, good outdoor gear will last for years. But accidents happen. That's when Penny can come to the rescue.

"There was a guy who was camping and forgot where his dog was," she said. "And when he started calling for it, the Rottweiler came ripping right through the mosquito netting of the tent door."

Being a small business, she generally works alone. But last summer, she had to call in reinforcements. "I had a setback when I broke my arm test-riding a mountain bike," she said. "I had a pack I was repairing and the guy needed it. So my husband, Craig, had to finish the repairs. He did a good job, too."