

# What a Stitch

by Nick Heil, Pacific NW Inlander, October 1997

Bring her your tattered, your torn, your blown out. Bring her your tent with a hole in the floor. Penny Schwyn can fix it. And if she can't, she can rebuild it, often better than it was before. Schwyn is a 36-year-old "sewist" and sole proprietor of Specialty Outdoors, a custom sewing operation that specializes in outdoor gear - from Gore-Tex pants with a whole in the knee to backpacks that need a few extra straps.

Her business, which she runs out of the basement of her split level home on Spokane's South Hill, has flourished primarily through word of mouth. Husband Craig, a part-time ski patroller at Mt. Spokane, helped spread the word in the skiing community, while friends in the Spokane Mountaineers quickly realized the talented resource they had literally right next door.

"People would complain because there was no one around to repair their gear," says Schwyn. "They would have to ship it off to Seattle or California or Colorado."

When word got out that Schwyn had the skills, and the desire, to mend, alter or replace, the calls started coming in. She says the outdoors community liked the fact that they had access to someone who not only had complex sewing skills, but good familiarity with outdoor sports. When Schwyn isn't managing Specialty Outdoors, she is outdoors - hiking, rafting, camping, skiing and biking with her husband, two sons and energetic golden retriever.

"I know the stuff and I do the stuff," says Schwyn. "So if someone is talking to me about the way their pants fit in a harness, or how they need a gizmo put on their backpack, I know what they're talking about. This recent customer, a diehard telemark skier wanted a pair of custom Lycra tights with knee pad covers and other features, and his eyes lit up when he was describing it to me because I said I understand exactly what he's looking for."

But such elaborate custom projects don't make up the bulk of Schwyn's work, she says. Much of it is no frills repair jobs, alterations for people with non-average body size, or replacing that pesky feature outdoor gear is hard pressed to go without: the zipper.

Schwyn cut her teeth in the outdoor gear industry while living in Golden, Colorado, where she met, and eventually began to work for Pat Smith, founder of MountainSmith, a company specializing in mid- to high-end backpacks.

"He was still working in his garage when we met," recalls Schwyn. Since husband Craig was in school, Schwyn decided to put her lifelong interest in sewing to work, helping Smith with production but, since the company was so small, also pitching in on research and design. When the family finally settled in Spokane, Schwyn set up her own workshop, complete with an industrial quality sewing machine that allows her to work with particularly tough fabrics like Cordura, canvas, nylon webbing and other textiles common to outdoor gear. Now she serves a steady run of clientele, almost all with unique needs - a duffel for a trip abroad, a jacket altered because the sleeves are too long.

Schwyn prices out her jobs based on the cost of materials needed, estimated hours of labor and complexity of the task. In most cases, she says, final costs are significantly lower than replacing gear. And, compared to the sticker shock can set in when a customer is shopping around for a new Gore-Tex parka or tent, refurbishing or repairing the original product can be a far more frugal option.

So does Schwyn hope to follow in the footsteps of mentor Pat Smith? Not really, she says. She likes working out of her home, running a small, custom operation. Manufacturing her own products and entering the competitive outdoor sports industry loses its appeal when she considers the sacrifices involved.

"I really like working at home," she says. "It's important for me to be near my family and not be a slave to the business."

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