

Sewing for the extreme

By Treva Lind

Of the Journal of Business



Penny Schwyn, outdoor-gear seamstress who operates Specialty Outdoors, repairs items such as this bear-damaged backpack.
Staff Photo by Treva Lind

A bear ate through the backpack. While the bag's owner escaped injury, the now-shredded side of his North Face product requires some serious patch work before the next camping trip.

Penny Schwyn, owner of a home-based sewing repair business called Specialty Outdoors, has that backpack among several jobs accumulating in her South Hill area workroom. The orders are from Spokane customers as well as contract work through such major

outdoor apparel retailers as Oslo, Norway-based Helly Hansen.

Schwyn's seamstress business specializes in outdoor active wear and gear, including a large bulk of requests to mend or alter ski clothes. Despite the North Face backpack's gaping hole, Schwyn says she knows exactly how she'll fix it.

"I'll patch it with a similar weight fabric and color," Schwyn says nonchalantly. After more than 15 years of repairing items such as \$400 ski jackets and \$200 bicycle shorts, Schwyn knows her way around nylon and fleece, heavy-duty zippers, and the performance needs of outdoor apparel to keep athletes and outdoor enthusiasts dry and warm.

"I've worked with hockey players, snowmobilers, bicyclists, fishermen, dirt bikers, rock climbers, skiers," she says. "I've probably hit every sport at least once."

Once a week, she picks up items for repair dropped off by customers at two Spokane-based businesses: Mountain Gear Inc., at 2002 N. Division, which sells gear and clothing for climbing, camping, hiking, and snow and paddle sports; and Spokane Alpine Haus, a longtime snow sports and outdoor sports retail store, at 2925 S. Regal, on Spokane's South Hill.

Specialty Outdoors' price list starts with a minimum charge of \$12.50 for a quick fix. Depending on the work, other charges are based on a \$60-per-hour fee, with most repairs broken down by estimated time increments. A basic zipper repair costs about \$45. The amount charged for shortening ski pants ranges from about \$45 to \$90, depending on the complexity of working with such features as gaiters, wear guards, zippers, snaps, and Velcro.

"A huge portion of what I do is shortening ski pants," Schwyn says. "I also do a lot of repairs of

old favorite coats, or something that you don't want to throw out because it's expensive Gore-Tex."

She adds, "Often, there's a huge emotional or sentimental attachment to an item, like someone summited whatever mountain in that coat."

The customers who drop off repairs at the stores usually write down a description of the work that is required, but Schwyn will call people if she has any questions about requests.

"The relationship I have with both stores is mutually beneficial," she adds. "I can solve problems for them if someone wants to buy pants, but they're too long, or they come to them with a repair need. I direct people back to the store if they need a product."

She also does modifications to make items work better or last longer, although she no longer does large tent repairs. Two of her current projects include adding cargo pockets to pants for a ski patrol worker, and adding pockets to a small pack to carry avalanche rescue shovels and probes.

About 30 percent of her work comes to her through the mail as a warranty repair contractor with two companies, Helly Hansen and Trew Crew LLC, an outerwear company based in Hood River, Ore. Those companies pay her directly for the under-warranty work.

She says Helly Hansen, for example, has a few people around the U.S. including her who handle warranty repairs for the company.

The other 70 percent of her work involves doing repairs or alterations of items dropped off by people at the two Spokane businesses, and for jobs referred to her business as an authorized U.S. repair center listed by The North Face Inc. to do its after-warranty work.

Schwyn first honed her craft in the 1980s as a sewing supervisor for the Golden, Colo.-based outdoor clothing company Mountainsmith. After moving to Spokane in 1991 with her husband and two children, she decided to resume that work in 1996 from home to earn extra income.

Schwyn adds that she strives to equal factory quality work, and that she understands such outdoor apparel industry terms as seam sealing, also known as seam taping, which keeps moisture from leaking through clothing items.

"That's what sets me apart, the alterations and aftermarket modifications I can do, and I understand the materials," she asserts.

She orders much of the materials she needs for repairs through the mail and online. "You can't get it in town," she says.

Schwyn says that she has run her business over the years mainly on a part-time basis to supplement her family's income. Over that time, the Schwyn family has enjoyed many of the same outdoor activities that her customers do. They ski, go mountain biking, camp, hike, and do

white-water rafting.

"That's a real key to my success, when someone talks to me about what they want to do with their gear, I get it," she adds. "I'm tuned into the outdoor community."

Today, she has five sewing machines in her workroom, including two that do overlock stitching and are referred to as sergers. Schwyn says the warranty contract work she does for retailers has grown the past five years, and she sometimes puts in more hours now depending on the time of year.

The months of August and September are the slowest, but requests pick up October through March as people focus on cold-weather activities, she adds. Although she handles the majority of the workload, she occasionally hires one seamstress on a contract basis to do repairs in busier months.

"The contract work has really added to my business growth," she says. "There's only a limited amount of specialty modification and repair work."

In the meantime, she says she enjoys the minor repair jobs, and the stories that go with them. She recently rescued a more than 30-year-old coat that was designed by a pioneer of mountaineering, Paul Petzoldt.

"I put some new snaps on it so (the owner) could still wear it," Schwyn says.

She also has a favorite note from another customer that hangs on the wall, describing the owner's seven climbing expeditions and how he heard about her work while in Nepal.

"You're well known in Himalayan circles," the note reads.

Schwyn adds, "He heard about me while in a pie shop in Kathmandu. I think that's the power of word-of-mouth marketing."