

Calgary's Sewing Room caters to quilters

10,000 Bolts Of Joy; Machines make craft much easier

By Gina Teel, Calgary Herald August 24, 2009

My Sewing Room - Started in 2001 by Anne Dale; - A Brother and Bernina sewing machine dealer, with an in-house certified service shop; - Offers more than 10,000 bolts of fabric on 8,000 square feet; - A lot of the new, incoming fabric is available through the store's online sales; - 24 full-time and part-time employees, (one is a Marilyn impersonator)

Quilt is one of those words that most people associate with grandmas and old-fashioned floral print flannel.

But quilts and quilting take on a fresh spin at My Sewing Room, where modern meets traditional to produce eye-popping results.

Billed as the largest independently owned quilting store in Canada, My Sewing Room boasts more than 10,000 bolts of all-cotton fabric, along with a robust selection of denim, wool and flannel.

Scads of fabric are available, ranging from reproduction Civil War and 1940s prints to the latest designer fare by hugely popular artists like Amy Butler, Mark Lipinski and Philip Jacobs.

Sewing machines are available in the 8,000-square-foot store which, depending on the model, (prices range from around \$300 to \$13,000) can do digitized embroidery and machine quilting in a lot less time than grandma used to manage by hand.

"You could do all this by hand, it takes time. The machines, if you want it to look like the real deal hand thing, there's ways to do that," said Anne Dale, owner of My Sewing Room.

The store caters to quilters of all persuasions, hence the availability of everything from staid, striped flannels to modern prints and punched-up florals in retro hues--most of which could easily do double-duty as stylish throw pillows, purses and clothing.

The other part of it has to do with Dale's selection strategy: when she sees a fabric she likes from a designer, she'll buy the whole collection instead of just one or two patterns.

Collections by designers can amount to hundreds of choices, but Dale said that's OK.

"If we choose to carry it, we carry all of it," said Dale, who's weakness for Asian themed fabrics is apparent, given the volume of bolts in that display.

Those customers who are in a hurry, or simply get overwhelmed by the fabric choices, can either pick up a container of pre-cut co-coordinating fabrics and materials for a specific quilt pattern, or turn to the knowledgeable staff for help.

There's a massive long-arm sewing machine in the back to sew quilts for customers if they don't want to do it themselves.

In addition to fabric, sewing machines, kits, batting, and notions, the business offers quilting classes, courses to help clients master the sewing machine they've just bought, and how-to instructions to make anything from a sock monkey to table runners and placemats.

About the only thing they don't teach is hand-quilting, due to a lack of instructors and interest from students.

Customers will never be short of ideas, as the store is steeped in all things quilt. Finished quilts on loan from Canadian and U. S. quilt designers adorn the walls, along with quilted wall hangings and art quilt pieces.

There are books and magazines, and tons of patterns. My Sewing Room carries a range of patterns and software versions thereof.

"There's a lot of software involved in sewing now," Dale said.

There's even one for clothes called My Label pattern software, which spits out a pattern that fits, based on the measurements entered.

Dale said some tweaking is still required, "just like clothes when you're at the store, there's an average, and if you're not the average, you have to tweak."

The longtime seamstress noted quilting is easier for someone who's sewed.

"Quilting is a little easier than clothing; quilts never have to fit anyone," she said.

My Sewing Room got its start in 2001, a natural fit for Dale, who began sewing for cash at a young age.

She grew up doing crafty things with her mom, and later made items for the professional craft circuit. Her dad sold sewing machines at Sears.

"He made me a purse with my name on it and everything, so they were both people who did things with their hands," she said.

After achieving a vocational certificate in sewing, Dale was hired by her teacher to sew high-end fabric into one-off designs for boutiques.

Other school staff with hard-to-fit issues hired her to sew special clothes for them.

Dale learned the ropes about business working at a dry-cleaning shop.

When she bought a new sewing machine, the place where she purchased it asked her to come in and teach, so she did.

Eventually, she and a coworker made a bid to buy the store they worked in.

The bid was unsuccessful and the business partners soon parted ways, but it wasn't long before Dale decided she'd go out on her own.

She got the business off the ground with an initial investment of \$100,000 cash --mostly the liquidated investments of her family --along with credit cards and breaks from suppliers.

Dale tapped her contacts from her sewing work over the years to get business off the ground at her first location, on Elbow Drive. Her first employee was her mom.

Business took off from the get-go. In 2006, space constraints saw them move to their current location, on Macleod Trail and Heritage Drive. Two years ago, husband Michael Dale left his job in IT to work for his wife.

They've renovated the space and installed special light fixtures so a fabric's true colours come shining through.

Today, sewing machines comprise 36 per cent of sales, followed by fabrics at 30 per cent, with classes, notions and miscellaneous picking up the rest.

Business is growing at between 25 per cent and 38 per cent a year. Annual sales are \$1.6 million.

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