

20 Creative Thinkers

Meet 20 people who are shaking up the decorated apparel market right now with their innovative ideas.

By Joan Chaykin, Joe Haley, Annie Rehill, Nicole Rollender, Dave Vagnoni and Dan Walsh

Wescoured the industry for the most creative thinkers—people who are inventing new decorating technology, using unique e-commerce and fundraising models, taking decorating and digitizing to a whole new level, and more. We're pleased to present 20 of the industry's top innovators: a community of artistic, passionate and profitable people who are changing the way that people look at logos and design.



The Thinker

Ted Stahl, GroupeSTAHL

Ted Stahl is an extreme thinker: He's constantly fascinated by the intricacies of how things work. And, he thinks about how to make things work way better. In fact, outside his busy work life, he bought two non-working tugboats that he completely refurbished and races in the International Tug Boat Races on the Detroit River.

The head of the global group of companies under the GroupeSTAHL umbrella, Stahl transformed his family-owned, Midwestern die-cut letters and numbers business (founded by his grandfather, A.C. Stahl, in 1932) into a multinational supplier of apparel decorating systems and supplies. "As a company, we've frequently been the harbinger of what's going to happen in the decorated apparel industry," he says. "For example, we were the first company to introduce digital heat transfers with Roland cutters before the CAD-cut industry existed in the U.S. and Europe. We challenge ourselves to create. We say, 'Can we take boats where boats don't go?' That's the juice we ride on: How do we go to the next level, that next innovation?"

Early on, Stahl left the family business

for a few years to develop several retail engraving businesses and to market and produce concerts (think Bob Seger), beauty pageants (Miss Universe) and networking fairs. He returned to the company in 1972, bursting with ideas for how to help decorator business owners succeed. "I knew they needed whole programs and a variety of decorating options, not just products and equipment," says Stahl, who's up at 5 o'clock every morning talking to his staff based in Europe and Asia. "I wanted to bring them those complete solutions."

And, 40-year industry veteran Stahl certainly has brought innovation to the table: GroupeSTAHL has grown to be parent company of Stahls' ID Direct (asi/541170), TransferExpress, Hotronix and 15 other heat-printing-related companies. That's in part due to Stahl's many garment-decorating innovations, including

inventing Thermo-FILM, a lightweight polyurethane film for athletic jersey personalization; manufacturing a cuttable material for every type of fabric used in the sporting goods industry, from micro-mesh to porthole mesh to nylon to neoprene; and inventing Water-Jet technology for custom-cutting twill.

Also close to Stahl's heart is seven-year project CadworxLIVE, which is free Web-based art-creation software that allows users to create their artwork online and then output it directly to their cutters. "We're constantly redesigning this program," he says. "At any one time we have 1,000 people using it. And, it never gets stale—it's not on your computer; it's out there in a cloud, so you're always getting the latest version of it. We just keep making it more and more intuitive. A kid can run it." — Nicole Rollender

The Magician

AJ Ahmed, Quality Punch



AJ Ahmed brings out the best in people — digitally. By converting photo files into embroidered files, the team at Torrance, CA-based Quality Punch (led by Ahmed, picture digitizing expert and head digitizer) developed a technique they call picture digitizing — and it's already causing quite a stir. "It was almost impossible to digitize from photographs and get a real-life look," Ahmed says. "The stitches got very dense and weren't too production-friendly."

"One client told him to make her 'look pretty,'" says Karen Habe, co-owner of Quality Punch. "Eversince that comment, AJ works his magic and makes little tweaks: The eyes get bigger, the nose shape pierces and the lips fuller — all this without the customer realizing he made any edits. So he gets two thumbs up for his artistry."

Ahmed's picture-digitizing method gives clients a finished file that's nearly a duplicate of their photograph, with an easy product run. One of the challenges in picture digitizing? Getting the correct thread colors. "A photo is made up of millions of shades, whereas in embroidery we're limited to solid-color thread," Ahmed says. "Another challenge is the eyes — the duplication must be exact."

Previously a teacher, Ahmed has been digitizing for 10 years and also trains new digitizers. His teaching experience has been a boon for the company. "He has trained several employees who had no digitizing experience and helped them become high-level digitizers," Habe says.

The company is also promoting Ahmed's unique picture-digitizing technique as an alternative to conventional corporate logos. "It has the advantage of a lower stitch count, easier production run and great pricing," he says. — Joan Chaykin

The Embroidery Olympian

Lee Caroselli, Balboa Stitch



For the first time, at age 61, Lee Caroselli tied the knot. There were no stitches involved. “I guess I finally wasn’t afraid this time,” she says. Truth be told, marriage might be the only thing that’s ever scared off this embroidery icon.

“I’ve always enjoyed doing something people said couldn’t be done,” says Caroselli, co-owner of Balboa Threadworks in Palm Desert, CA. And by “people,” she means an entire nation.

For example, when the world’s best threadheads, all based in Japan, failed repeatedly to produce a workable embroidery design for a 1994 Elvis Presley stamp (you know the one), Caroselli took over the job. Well, sort of. “I did the work in-between trade shows,” she says. “I had to prove I could do it.” Using a jaw-dropping and until-then-unthinkable blending technique, she created the now-famous stamp that was good enough for “the king” of rock ‘n’ roll.



“It meant a lot to show that Americans could do this,” she says.

For the decorating industry, this was the equivalent of the Manhattan Project on steroids. What stumped the world’s best embroiderers for two years, Caroselli figured out in, oh, about six hours. Ho-hum. “We were able to do it with just six cones of thread,” she says. “The original designs were scrapped because they needed 28 cones. It made it cost-prohibitive.”

Suddenly and deservedly, Caroselli had the decorating world on a string. Not long after her stamp coup, Balboa Threadworks was publicly honored at one of the largest industry shows in the world. There was no plaque or medal given, but there was a deferential banner unfurled. “The head of the Japanese embroidery industry came to our booth and they rolled out this red carpet,” she says. “He bowed and said ‘Ichiban,’ which means ‘number one.’ It was like passing the baton to the U.S.”

And ever since, Caroselli has run with it. Even today, her creativity has the industry all shook up. – Dave Vagnoni

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The One-Suit Wonder

Randy Carr, World Emblem International (asi/98264)



Randy Carr used to be a screamer. “That doesn’t work too good managing people,” he says. That’s especially true when you have 600 people to manage on several continents. “There’s 200 in Miami, 90 in Europe,” he says. The rest are scattered around the globe – fitting for the name of Carr’s burgeoning embroidery empire, World Emblem International (asi/98264), which he built from a small embroidery company in 1993 to an eight-location international success by focusing on the uniform rental market.

“It was a struggle for a while in the beginning,” Carr says. “Then there was a questioning phase.” That phase is long gone now. A softer-spoken Carr has ditched the “why I oughta” Ralph Kramden routine. Instead, he walks around with a journal, making to-do lists, jotting down new ideas and carefully watching his staff as they work on precision-embroidered emblems and expertly decorated apparel. “The devil is in the details. There are details I can’t miss,” he says.

Headquartered in south Florida, World Emblem’s massive 45,000-square-foot facility is among the largest and best equipped in the country. The company recently earned a spot on the prestigious Inc. 5000 list, which recognizes the fastest-growing, U.S.-based private companies. “We continue to break into new markets and offer new products,” says Carr, who knows

how to run every machine his employees use. “And we’re making money.”

But don’t think the quirky 38-year-old Carr is all work. “At night I’m home spending time with my kids,” he says. He has two boys, one of whom who was nearly killed in a car accident when he was a toddler. “The doctors didn’t think he’d be able to walk,” Carr says. “Now you almost wouldn’t know anything ever happened to him.”

Carr’s once coma-bound miracle child is getting stronger every day. And when he grows up, he probably wants to be just like his dad. Who wouldn’t? Living in Miami, Carr could be Don Johnson’s stand-in. World Emblem’s president and CEO does what he wants. He drives a Mercedes. He listens to Guns N’ Roses. He wears flip-flops to work. He owns just one suit. And, since a BlackBerry is boring, he carries an iPhone with 800 contacts. “Because it’s cool,” he says. – DV

The Mentor

Melanie Coakley, Embroidery FX



If you ever wanted to know anything about embroidery, ask Melanie Coakley.

Known for her digitizing expertise, 20-year industry veteran Coakley travels to give talks and workshops, including, as of January 2010, in her own shop, Embroidery FX (“effects”), in Chattanooga, TN. “People fly from all over the country to spend four days learning the art,” she says. “And, I get into it. We’re supposed to close out the day at 6 p.m., and then it’s 6:30

p.m. and class is still in session.”

Coakley, along with her husband Steve, also oversees the commercial division of Floriani Products, which specializes in stabilizers. This crazy-busy mentor has given talks for RNK Distributing/Floriani at the Imprinted Sportswear Show and for the National Network of Embroidery Professionals, and she lectures in Floriani’s dealer network on topics including digitizing and income-earning. She spoke at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology in 1999, and in 2002 gave the keynote speech at Hirsch International in Chicago. During the past two years she’s given presentations at the Original Sewing and Quilt Shows in nine states.

Likemany other embroidery greats’ stories, it was love at first sight for Coakley. The object of her desire? A multi-needle, multi-head commercial embroidery machine at a trade show. “I came home and said, ‘I’ve found what I want to be for the rest of my life,’” she says. “My husband rolled his eyes, but once I told him he was going to have to hock the house, he got that I was dead serious.”

Embroidery FX grew rapidly and the couple built their reputation on quality and impeccable service. “If something happens and a vendor has to back-order, then we pick up the phone,” Coakley says. “You’ve got to take care of your customers. They become your friends.” Identifying the need to track and retrieve data for repeat orders, in 2002 she worked with a software developer and discovered that others had the same need. Now she also sells Embroidery Forms Express. “No more looking through the dead files,” she cheers.

But, the meat of the business is logos for teams and companies and educating others on how to build up their decorated apparel businesses. Recent months have continued to brim with opportunity. In February 2010 Coakley spoke in San Antonio on how to start an embroidery business; in April she participated in a “Weekend with Walter Floriani” in Knoxville, TN, and the American Embroidery Conference in Atlanta, and she hosted her workshop back in Chattanooga. Plus, she’s actively working as a consultant and writing for trade magazines. – Annie Rehill

The Memory Man

Jerry Decker, Stitch Designers (asi/741145)



Now when the first Superman comic book came out? Or, how many lifeboats were on the

Titanic? Jerry Decker, head digitizer for Louisville, KY-based Stitch Designers (asi/741145), is a Rainman-like figure with an uncanny ability to retain facts and formulas picked up in the many books and journals that he pores over. “I had asthma as a kid so I couldn’t play sports,” he says. “So to make friends, I’d dread everything about sports and a variety of things like the Titanic. That’s where it started.”

Jeremy Judah, Stitch Designers’ director of marketing, can attest to Decker’s deep well of knowledge. “Jerry has a wealth of information, especially sports trivia,” Judah says. “He can memorize color charts—it’s the way his brain works. What I think makes Jerry special is his ability to recreate an image from anything. He doesn’t require vector



or camera-ready art to duplicate an image. You can give him a hand drawing or something you normally couldn’t work with and he can turn it into something awesome.”

Previously a graphic artist and architectural designer, Decker has been embroidering since 1993. Judah says that employees like Decker are key to providing customers with consistent quality. In fact, according to Judah, there’s 300 years worth of combined experience at Stitch Designers.

Decker’s photographic memory is certainly useful as a top digitizer. With 17 years of experience, he recreates “leave-you-speechless work,” Judah says. Some of the high-profile work that Decker has produced includes embroidering the blankets used on the horses for the Kentucky Derby. He once embroidered a purse for the Queen of England; the design was based on the royal silk uniforms that the queen’s jockeys wear for racing events. “I had to do the design from a skewed photograph given to me from Buckingham Palace,” Decker says. “One purse is on display in the palace and one is with the owner who commissioned the project.” – JC





The Cool Teacher

Dana Zezzo, Pro Towels Etc.
(asi/79750)

Remember the cool teacher in high school? The one everyone wanted to have, including parents, because the teacher inspired students to learn? Well, Dana Zezzo, vice president of sales for Pro Towels Etc. (asi/79750), is this industry's cool teacher. "I've been given a gift to educate," he says without hesitation.

Energetic, feisty and always "on," Zezzo (whom people call Bulldog, for obvious reasons) takes an nontraditional approach to the classes he teaches. Even though he's in the towel business, he doesn't teach his students how to sell towels. Rather, he assumes decorators and distributors are blank slates. "The most successful way to gain traction and build the account is to start with the idea that they know nothing," he says.

This approach was born from what Zezzo sees as a diversity of experiences in the industry and an understanding that most ad specialty salespeople aren't schooled in sales. Embroiderers,

for example, may be skilled at their craft but aren't the savviest of salespeople; to them, a blue towel is a blue towel. But to the buyer it may be too blue, or too heavy, or not heavy enough.

Zezzo helps his pupils counter those objections by teaching them the good-better-best approach. And, he says that when his students go into a sales meeting with the good-better-best approach,

their close ratio quadruples.

But, teaching and selling towels isn't enough for Bulldog; he's out to leave his mark. "Some people choose to walk life about a half-mile from the edge of the cliff," he says. "I choose to walk on the edge of the cliff. I live my life two ways: I'm going to change this industry for the better or I'm going to get thrown out trying." - Joe Haley

The Major League Artist

Cory Dean, Artwork Source



Everybody asks for money from their parents at some point, right? "I borrowed \$25,000," Cory Dean admits. A bit much, don't you think? "I started a digitizing business," he says. And how did that turn out? "We do slightly under \$10 million in business a year," he tells us. Wise guy. "I just do the best that I can and don't try to tackle too many things," he says. Good thing, considering his competition is sacked, bloodied and limping off the field. "We're the only ones I know of who have nighttime service and production," he says, confidently. "We have 80 digitizers and 40 vectorizers. I think we have the best artwork drawing business in the country."

Probably the fastest, too. "We charge a flat \$15 for two hours of labor," says Dean, sitting in his about-to-be-redecorated apartment in Seattle. "We get 95% of our jobs done in that time." Only 95%, huh? Finally, a chink in the armor. "We had 10% growth in 2009," he counters. "We're really spending \$500,000 on a new website. We're going to have the most professional-grade order processing in the world." Always has an answer, doesn't he? And if he doesn't, his company does. Tacoma, WA-based Artwork Source is a 24/7 operation. Not that Dean is always at his desk. "I try to stay out of the office to let people make decisions," he says. "It also helps me reduce my workload."

And it allows Dean to focus on other things. In addition to his business prowess, he is a referee inspector for Major League Soccer (MLS). "I was a referee for the first nine years that MLS was in existence," he says. "Now I got train referees." He also likes French food - a lot. "I like the famous restaurants, but I also like to find the special places people don't know about," he says. Oh, then there's that redecoration project. "I'm having some Dale Chihuly glass sculptures made," he says. "There'll be a couple of statues, a flower pot, a chandelier with free-form glass pieces and two walls of drawings." Yeah - sounds like he can repay his parents now. - DV



The Fundraiser

Jill Valentino, Appleback Embroidery (asi/123011)

Jill Valentino, a self-described TV addict, sees herself as a mix of Mary Tyler Moore, Lucy Ricardo, Detective Benson and Debra Barone. Quit the quartet, huh? “Debra because of all the chaos,” Valentino jokes.

No, Valentino’s life isn’t a drama or a sitcom, but she has enough going on to make a really good script. Friends compare Valentino, owner of Appleback Embroidery (asi/123011), to the drum-pounding, sunglass-toting Energizer Bunny. “I’m good with about four hours of sleep a night,” she says, matter-of-factly. There are times, though, when those four hours are cut short or missed entirely, like when she is out volunteering with her community’s rescue squad. “I’ve seen a lot,” says Valentino, who once, at age 16, arrived at the scene of a horrific crash where a baby had been thrown from the arms of a helpless mother. “I remember it like it was yesterday,” she says.

No doubt in her formative years, Valentino saw life’s harsh realities. But, if anything, they’ve made her unafraid and more concerned about others. Raised on a New Jersey farm, she learned

early on how to work, and there was more to do than just feeding the horses. “My parents always had us helping people and involved in fundraising,” she says. From lemonade stands to roast beef dinners, she learned how to make a good buck for a good cause. “I totally enjoyed fundraising,” she says.



And now years later, Valentino still does. Lincoln, NJ-based Appleback has created one of the most successful fundraising programs anywhere for sport teams and organizations. Selling personalized spiritwear, from flannel pants to hoodies to hats, Appleback helps groups raise money in a very stylish way. “I saw a need for it,” she says. “I know clothing fundraisers can be hard.” That’s why she simplified the process for customers, offering features like custom sizing on site, Web stores and even “tally sessions” to make sure the program is on track. “We work to achieve customer goals,” she says. To put it bluntly, she has cut out the chaos of fundraising programs. Bet Debra Barone would be proud. —DV

The SEO Whiz

Jeff Taxdahl, Thread Logic



Jeff Taxdahl, who was laid off from a marketing management position in 2001, was finally ready to take an entrepreneurial risk. So, the guy who had no embroidery-business experience dove right in and started Jordan, MN-based Thread Logic in 2002; last year the company posted a 25% jump in revenue to \$1.1 million, building on consistent double-digit increases since the business opened.

Taxdahl, who’s a marketing wizard, credits his background with helping him to develop his unique online business model — he uses pay-per-click, search engine optimization and other online marketing tools to help potential customers all over the country to find him. “Look, it takes a specific skill set to make this work,” says Taxdahl, who went on a rigorous six-month bender in 2008, perfecting his pay-per-

click model. “I was skeptical about the e-commerce model, but now more than 90% of my customers are based outside of Minnesota.”

Thread Logic’s business model is clean, simple and easy. Clients visit the company’s website, where Taxdahl offers about 350 wearables, including polos, sweatshirts, jackets and hats; they select their products and upload their logos to be digitized and embroidered. Taxdahl even provides free logo evaluation, to ensure the artwork will work for embroidery (30% of those uploads turn into orders). Then, in seven to 10 business days, customers receive their decorated apparel order.

“Our work is very business-to-business,” Taxdahl says. “We specialize in left-chest logos, and mostly do corporate apparel and uniforms. It’s not that sexy, but it drives our business.” And drive the business, it does: Thread Logic serves about 3,000 customer accounts. “Our repeats are running at about 50%,” says Taxdahl, who cranked

out 70,000 decorated pieces last year.

“Flat-rate pricing is the single-most innovative thing we’ve done,” Taxdahl says. “That removed a buying barrier for clients buying online: They get our pricing now. To get our profit margins right, we’ve massaged the model to find our average.”

In the beginning, Taxdahl admits, it was tough. “I learned by trial and error how to run my two-head machine,” he says. “My startup financing came from a loan I took out against the cash value in one of my insurance policies. The learning curve was very steep.” For the first year, he pretty much did it all, from running the machine to selling his services. Then, he really broke ground.

Today, Taxdahl has eight employees and four machines with 15 heads. Just this year, he moved from a 1,500-square-foot shop on his property to a 4,000-square-foot industrial space. “Right now, this is more space than we need, but I’m projecting out our growth,” he says. —NR



The Yin and the Yang

Jerilee Auclair, Black Eagle Designs
Jim Auclair, Fixyourstitch Embroidery

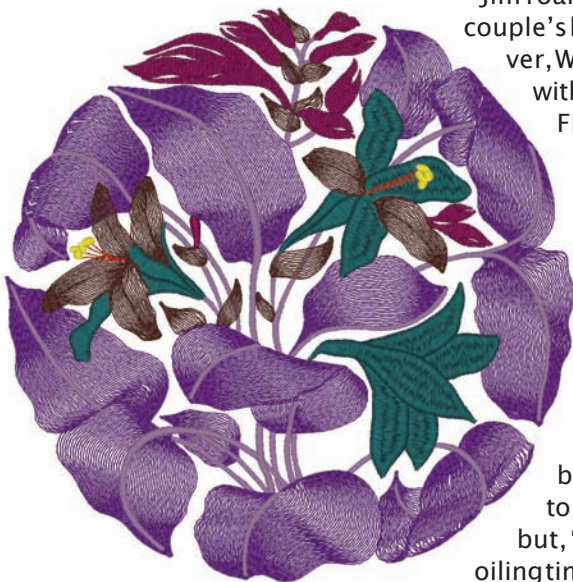
Talk about opposites attracting: Jim (calm, centered machine tech) and Jerilee Auclair (wild-minded, extroverted digitizer and educator). Where they meet: “We both care about people,” Jim says. “That’s where it starts. We use our talent and knowledge, learn from each other and others, and share the information.”

Jim has come to Jerilee’s long-distance rescue twice. “I was totally flipped out,” she recalls of one deadline when she was embroidering a ghee for a kickboxer’s competition event. “I broke the reciprocator, and there was some ... thing that I had to align, that I’d have never found,” she says. “He went into this calm teaching mode, and stayed on the phone for an hour with this panic-stricken woman.”

Jim roams the Northwest from the couple’s home just outside Vancouver, WA, saving stitchers in distress with the resources of his company, Fixyourstitch Embroidery, but mainly with his own substantial skills. The work, which he’s done since the early 1990s, is “like a puzzle,” he says. “I love taking the machine apart, making it perfect.”

And, there’s Hook Wash, Jim’s brainchild. The product cleans machines while leaving a fine mist of mineral oil so the bearing doesn’t dry up. It’s safe to use on electronics and plastics, but, “It isn’t meant to replace your oiling time,” Jerilee cautions. After four years of field-testing, Jim introduced it to the market in 2008. Jerilee says that their customers have found so many unforeseen applications for the product – including on the NASCAR racing circuit – that she’s has started a “list of 101 uses.”

Jerilee’s company, Black Eagle Designs, specialized in stock designs until 2009.

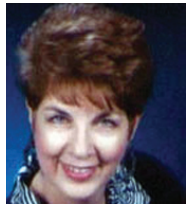


But, “I was losing my passion trying to figure out what people wanted,” she says. “I didn’t even know what I was chasing.” So she refocused. “I wanted to do very Earth-related things,” she says. “Hemp is very sustainable. All my thread is vegan.” Now she sells hemp bags and embroidered handmade paper. Her designs are inspired by the Japanese spiritual system Reiki, of which she’s a master. And she’s in Shamanic training, as well as being a crystal healer – which explains that shining selenite-monolith photo on her website.

Years ago, Jerilee had been working toward a teaching degree, but her studies were diverted when she moved to Bend, OR, where no four-year college was in sight. She “got into embroidery as a way to make money, but it became a passion,” she says. Her favorite part? “I’m an educator,” she says. “I just took a different avenue.” She teaches digitizing, writes articles (including for Stitches) and provides online instruction to a community of nearly 500 embroiderers and digitizers. – AR

The Embroidery Coach

Joyce Jagger, Embroidery Tips & More



Joyce Jagger starts her day with an intense hour-and-a-half weights and cardio workout that would make most twentysomethings cringe. Then, she gets down to the day's real work—running Binghamton, NY-based Embroidery Tips & More, her busy training and consulting firm for embroidery business owners.

Mostly, she works 50 to 60 hours a week in her home office. Other weeks, it's a whole different story. Jagger, who started her own embroidery business in 1978 and then sold the 36-head company in 1998, just returned from a week-long Embroidery Cruise to the Caribbean, where she led decorating seminars and networking

activities aboard a luxury cruise ship. "I've also been to Barbados," she says. "It was a 12-head shop right on the beach, and I got to spend a week teaching the employees embroidery and digitizing."

So how did she become such an in-demand embroidery trainer (she's called The Embroidery Coach)? "When I had my business, I'd look at where the holes were in my employees' training, say in hooping or running the machines," says Jagger, who has 90 students (as she prefers to call her clients) at any one time. "Then I'd develop the fastest, easiest ways for them to get the task done. Bottom line, I keep every process simple."

So, after Jagger sold her decorating business, she stayed on as a training manager for a while. She also started to build her small training empire, which has

flourished purely through word of mouth. "I've spent zero dollars on advertising," she says. "I eat, sleep and drink embroidery. My whole business is training embroiderers."

Jagger's business includes onsite and phone consultation for embroidery businesses of all sizes, a resource-packed website (including more than 150 videos and a tip of the day that she e-mails to her students), monthly webinars and live phone chats, e-newsletters, blogs, and now a just-published book that's already generating a lot of buzz: *The Truth About Embroidery Business Success*.

"I'll be 72 on my next birthday," says Jagger, who has trained more than 500 embroidery business owners. "I have no thoughts of retiring. None. I have lots to do and lots to teach." — NR

The Fine Artist

Geri Finio, Studio 187



Weren't all the great artists turning out stunning work pretty much before they were learning their ABCs? "I've been sewing, doing crewel, embroidery and macramé since I was

5 years old," says Geri Finio, owner of Moorestown, NJ-based Studio 187.

Fresh from the Picasso exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, she's excited and invigorated. "Maybe I'll quit embroidery altogether and become a painter," jokes Finio, who listens to Mozart and Beethoven when she's creating her fine-art embroidery work. "My work is definitely an art, absolutely and unequivocally, and it always has been."

One piece, a quilt Finio designed and stitched, hangs on the wall in the main lobby of The Starting Point, a nonprofit educational and referral center based in New Jersey that deals with everything from substance abuse to grieving to eating disorders. The quilt was crafted to raise



awareness of childhood abuse, especially those survivors who take their scars into adulthood. She was also part of a project called the Americana Stars Memorial, which was created to honor the victims of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and 9/11. "I stitched hundreds of stars to be added to a 210-foot-long banner," she says.

Finio also completed all of the sewouts for cross-stitcher Joan Elliot's latest book, *Asian Inspired Machine Embroidery*, which includes 24 projects. She also creates custom work for clients, including monograms on fine linens and draperies. But, it's the lack of artistry and the on-the-cheap workmanship from many embroiderers that irks Finio. "Stitchers need to bring embroidery back up to an art form," she says. "The embroidery standard has been lowered over the last 15 to 20 years."

As for artists who inspire Finio? "There are so many," she says. "Because I'm creative, it depends on the day. Picasso? Cézanne? I'm just open to everything." — JH

The Neuro-Physiologist

Brian B. Ferguson, Willowtree Embroidery



Embroidered surgical caps? For real? Yep, says Bryan B. Ferguson, owner of Parkville, MD-based Willowtree Embroidery. "My absolutely favorite part of this work is the look in their eyes when my customers get the product (called CraniCaps)," he says. "That's when you

know you hit it out of the park."

Ferguson's an embroiderer, but he's also a surgical neuro-physiologist. Say what? For more than 15 years, he has worked in the operating room at Baltimore's University of Maryland Medical Center, tracking responses from a patient's nervous system and alerting surgeons if a particular area is being compromised. "It's kind of like the embroidery business, because it's all about detail," he says. "But if a stitch goes wrong, nobody dies."

So, more than a decade ago, when his coworkers started sewing their own cotton surgical caps, "there was nothing that just screamed me," Ferguson recalls. So he turned to his wife, Mary, whose family was in the tailoring business—and she taught him to cut a pattern.

And, the people in the OR loved Ferguson's new cap. "They wanted one, too," he says. "I'm like, 'Hmm,' but they said, 'I'll pay you,' so OK, fine. At first the business trickled in, and basically



paid for my Starbucks coffee." Then it became a steady stream, and Ferguson had another cranium flash: "I'd never seen an embroidered surgical cap in the OR," he says. Again, Mary had the solution: Buy an embroidery machine, of course.

Ferguson, who was trained on his first machine by an embroiderer named Spanky, started cranking out decorated caps. Soon, it was time for another family powwow. To grow or not to grow? "We realized we never wanted to wonder 'what if,' so we purchased a commercial machine," he says.

Wise choice. "Vendors from medical companies started to call, and they wanted to get their company logos on so they could pass them out as OR gifts," Ferguson says. "And then, it just started rolling: ophthalmology departments, departing and welcoming gifts for hospital patients, and soon. We'd even get transplant teams who said, 'Oh, we want a transplant cap so we have a team effect.'"

Last year, Willowtree even donated CraniCaps to Army hospitals in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Ferguson does work for GE Healthcare and Olympus, and he offers clients lots of embroidery design choices (you can have a red tribal raven or the Superman logo). He recently started sublimating on performance caps, as well. — AR



The Big Man on Campus

Mark Bender, LettermansClub.com



Mark Bender makes sure everyone knows who the big man on campus are with his unique system for custom building letterman jackets. The epitome of cool is now available to the masses.

Bender's fans say he has revolutionized the chenille and letterman jacket business. "The letterman jacket has been such a staple item for so many years," says the modest Bender, owner of Tacoma, WA-based LettermansClub.com. "So, it wasn't innovating the jacket itself. It was innovating how people order it."

Besides delivering quality chenille work on his jackets, Bender has developed an

e-commerce site that lets his clients build custom jacket super-easily. End-users go online and build their jacket from scratch—deciding on everything from the type of sleeves, collars and closures to whether or not the jacket has a hood. Then, they place their lettering and patches, and click the order button. "My customer can actually see the coat being built," Bender says. "Then, they see the final product, and we store the images, so we can replicate the same jacket again."

And these aren't run-of-the-mill, off-the-shelf jackets. They're high-quality—costing about \$350 to \$800—and are produced in a timely manner. "Our variables are quite big," Bender says, adding that his site offers three styles of jackets with 50 options for each. Plus, he houses

his dealers' images, so their clients can easily browse their entire selections.

Letterman jackets are highly appealing. "Today, they're for everyone," Bender says. "It's not just for the 'big man on campus.' We create jackets for marching bands and all kinds of school clubs." He also sells jackets for school reunions, to people who've either grown out of, lost or simply wore out their original jacket. And, he says a letterman jacket is a good fit for the nostalgia market. In fact, LettermansClub.com will take old patches and emblems and use them to create new jackets.

Bender sports three letterman jackets of his own, so he saw a walking advertisement for the company. "Whenever I wear one, people ask, 'Whoa, where did you get that?'" he says. — JH

The Multitasking Medievalist

Erich Campbell, Black Duck Inc. (asi/140730)



Erich Campbell can build your website, embroider whatever you want or translate Beowulf from Old English. It all depends on his interests at the moment.

Campbell works as a digitizer and computer and marketing guru for Black Duck Inc. (asi/140730), an embroidery and digitizing company in Albuquerque, NM. There, he's gained a reputation as the do-it-all man. He designed the company's website, which is known for its comic book superhero designs, maintains the company's Internet presence through a variety of social networking tools, and creates embroidered and digital designs, as well.

"I'm a pretty notorious multitasker," Campbell says. "At my desk, I have three monitors running. One is social networking and communications. One is company e-mail and our company management system. One is where I'm digitizing."

It's not a career path Campbell planned. He studied English in college and focused on the medieval era, learning Old Norse, Old English, modern German and some facility with Icelandic as he examined the classics.

When Campbell was growing up, his mother worked at a company that had a digitizer covered up and unused. He got a job there as a box handler, but people learned pretty quickly he was a bit of a computer junkie. "Even though I was hired as a box handler, when they had a computer problem, they'd call me up," he says.

Eventually, they gave Campbell a chance to try his hand at the digitizer, and he got hooked. "Once I realized, here's a way to make a 3-D object out of a computer drawing, I said, 'That's for me,'" he says.

After that, Campbell says he sort of "fell into" the business. He ended up at Matrix Executive, another Albuquerque company that later merged with Black Duck. Since coming to Black Duck, he's won several awards for his artwork.

Not that he ever left behind his medievalist influences. Yes, a good chunk of the business is creating logos, but it's not just that. Campbell recalled one customer who paid Black Duck to dress a statue of the Virgin Mary for his home. He points to medieval embroideries such as the Bayeux Tapestry as influencing the work he does today.

And no, we're not talking about the "Renaissance Faire" brand of medievalism, either. "Renaissance faires are highly inaccurate," Campbell says. "Academia is what's for me. What I'm into doing is the research and bringing forth those influences." —Dan Walsh

The Design Master

Michael Savoia, Villa Savoia Inc.



Talk about high-end, precision work: trapunto, hand-guided cording and chain stitching, hand-cut appliqué.

Michael Savoia, whose clients include many well-known interior designers (think Michael K. Smith and Thomas Pheasant) and celebrities, creates extremely luxe, one-of-a-kind designs that have the embroidery community swooning.

"What happens is, I work with an interior designer and we create a concept — I articulate that concept and do samples to illustrate the desired effect for the project, be it a curtain embroidery, a chair back or a pillow," says Savoia, who has owned West



create a concept — I articulate that concept and do samples to illustrate the desired effect for the project, be it a curtain embroidery, a chair back or a pillow," says Savoia, who has owned West

The Digitizing Cheerleader

Neville Appanna, E-Fect



If digitizers needed an international cheerleader, Neville Appanna would be the guy. Appanna, a South African-based digitizer for E-Fect, started at age 14 in his uncle's embroidery plant, helping out with large-scale drawings.

"I watched the manual digitizers and assisted the machine operators," says Appanna, who worked in the fashion and corporate fields before turning to digitizing full-time. "When embroidery and digitizing went computerized, I slotted in naturally in an industry where most of the older digitizers struggled to bridge the gap between manual and computerized design."

When the economy began to drop and the future of independent digitizers looked uncertain, Appanna met up with



Saeed Shekari, a talented programmer who had been working alone, to develop and test digitizing software, called I-Cliqq Embroidery Software, which would be lower-cost and user-friendly for digitizers of

Hollywood-based Villa Savoia Inc., a pillow/embroidery/hand-beading company, since 2001. "Once it's approved, I receive cuts of fabric from the workroom constructing the curtains or furniture. It's so collaborative: I work in tandem with their needs and embellish the fabric accordingly."



Savoia got his start as a salesman in an interior

design showroom in West Hollywood. "I sold very expensive pillows that were classically creative," he says. "With my textile and design background, I figured I could actually create and sell this kind of work myself."

And, Savoia certainly has - but remains quite humble

(for a guy whose work graces celebrity homes and is regularly featured in books, magazines and

online). "There are more civic-minded projects that mean a great deal to me, such as the pillows I made for Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House here in Los Angeles," he says.



One person who definitely can't say enough about Savoia's impressive work in high-end interior design is Jerilee Auclair, owner of Vancouver, WA-based Black Eagle Designs, who has collaborated with Savoia on work that was featured in Architectural Digest. "The things he does just rock my world," she says. "He blows it up. He doesn't have limits." - JC



all levels. "It's still a work in progress," Appanna says.

Outspoken with his ideas on everything from energy to politics, Appanna is ultra-passionate about embroidery and digitizing. That's why Bonnie

Landsberger, owner of Cannon Falls, MN-based Moonlight Design, calls Appanna the global digitizing cheerleader.

"His enthusiasm ignites passion in others and he offers encouragement even in tough times," she says. "Years back, when we first discovered the Internet, Nevi was already there, connecting with U.S. digitizers and embroiderers, sharing his knowledge one-mail discussion lists, and eventually blogs and social networks."

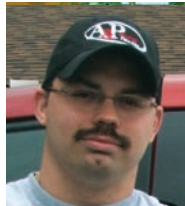
And Appanna is thrilled to be in the role. "Over the years, my communications with Bonnie Landsberger and others in my band of merry embroiderers resulted in more of a hands-on friendly team that we see across the U.S. today,"



hesays. "It's quite a multifaceted project that we all contribute to, and it's interesting to see Cliqq slowly span out across the globe." - JC

The Young Upstart

Howard Potter, A & P Master Images

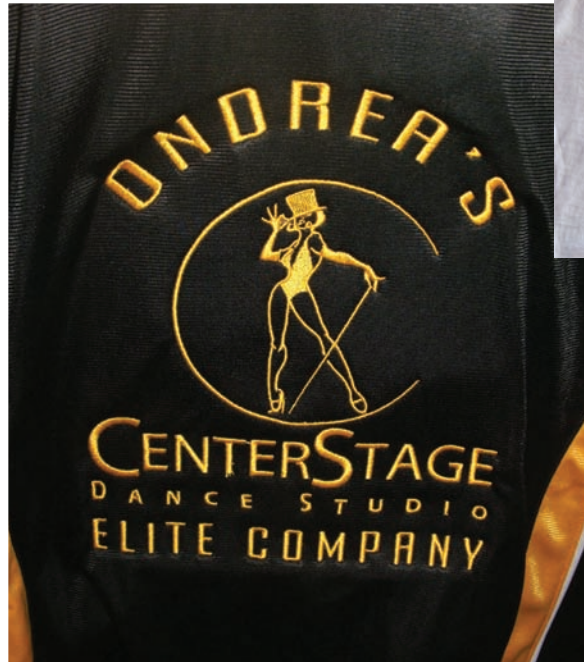


Would you sell your car to rent retail space for your decorating business? Well, that's what Howard Potter did.

"I sold my brand-new Impala and got something cheaper," says Potter, who moved his growing business, A & P Master Images, into 700 square feet of storefront space in 2007. Now, he commands almost 3,000 square feet and is projected to hit \$400,000 in revenues this year.

"Not bad for a kid who didn't grow up in the best living situation," says Potter, who lived in The House of the Good Shepherd for disadvantaged children from ages 11 to 18. He's been like a Tasmanian devil since he founded his Yorkville, NY-based decorating business in 2003 at age 22—while also honing his graphic design skills and pouring metal for a living. "I sacrificed two to three years of my life, working up to 80 hours a week," he says. "That first year I brought in just \$10,000. I grew my business in a controlled way. I did my research before I bought new equipment."

Now, Potter's business (he's got four employees who are graphic artists and can run the machines) really hops: He offers his clients embroidery, screen



printing, sublimation, vinyl, tackletwill, chromablast, graphic design, digitizing and a selection of more than 700,000 promotional products—and he does all his imprinting in-house. "Ninety percent of our business is referrals and word of mouth," he says. "We recently got an \$8,000 order to screen print 650 hoodies from a referral."

But, Potter's definitely earned his success, in part by being fearless. "Cold-calling?" he says. "Yeah, I literally cold-called every business in the phone book when I started." And, he did. He mailed a flyer



in a handwritten envelope to 100 prospects a week, and then followed them all up with a phone call the next week.

Now, Potter's got about 400 clients, mostly local businesses (car dealerships, hospitals, colleges, Walmart distribution centers, Home Depot and KISS FM, the local radio station). He prefers to keep things local—and to interact with his clients. "I don't have an e-commerce feature on my website," he says. "I want my customer to interact with me. I also answer every e-mail for a quote personally within five to 10 minutes."

Potter, who donates a lot of decorated apparel for charity events, makes sure he gives back to his former group home by hosting an annual bowl-a-thon (this year's event raised \$3,000). "You have to show you care," he says. "I'm kind of a local success story. I came from nothing, so I constantly want to give back. I want my kids to help others. I don't want them to ever take things for granted." — NR



The Good Neighbor

Jenni Cox, National Network of Embroidery Professionals



If the embroidery industry is a far-flung community, Jenni Cox, co-founder of the National Network of Embroidery Professionals (NNEP) in Kent, OH, is the ultimate good neighbor.

Consider this nomination that Stitches received for this Creative Thinkers list: “Jenni Cox and the whole NNEP family (her parents, Arch and Susan Ritchie, are her partners). They have a knack for bringing the industry together. The annual NNEP Show in Columbus, OH, and the regional Embroidery Marts are the best conferences for rejuvenating the industry.”

“I’ve been told they’re the family reunion you want to go to,” Cox says. “We have people who never missed one in like 12 years. Our goal is to help apparel decorators

build and grow successful businesses.” Fifteen years ago, when NNEP was just getting off the ground, the embroidery industry was not as, let’s say, neighborly. “Embroiderers were ultra-competitive and there was this huge fear of knowledge sharing,” says Cox, who says NNEP’s goal was to encourage a higher level of professionalism and partnership among friendly competitors.

But let’s back up. When the Ritchies and Cox were running their own embroidery business in the early ‘90s, they realized there was no real infrastructure in the commercial embroidery business. After surveying small and large embroidery businesses nationally, they decided to create a membership association for commercial embroiderers. Launched in 1996, NNEP provides information, member services and benefits to nearly 1,200 pro-

fessional apparel decoration businesses; most of these businesses have commercial embroidery machines. The annual NNEP conference and trade show (held in the spring) and the national tradeshow, Embroidery Mart (held in the summer), provide free industry-specific education.

And what’s a neighborhood without the occasional garage sale? NNEP members can participate in the annual Garage Sale, which rakes in about \$12,000 to \$20,000, at the NNEP national show—it’s away for members to liquidate anything embroidery-related. (You’ll find everything from hoops to a mobile trailer rigged out for embroidery.) “It’s a hoot,” Cox says. “One year we had a lady pay the hotel bellman to hold her place in line because she wanted to attend the last class of the day, but she was determined to get a specific garage-sale item.” – JH ■

Coming Next Issue

What’s coming up in August Stitches

By Nicole Rollender

Just Playing Around

■ Gwen Stefani, Stella McCartney and even Charlie Sheen have launched kids’ apparel lines—and you can bet there are lots of kids asking for Hara-juku Lovers tees and jackets. In the decorated-apparel world, younger buyers and opinionated end-users are influencing the apparel styles, colors and decoration that you sell. We’ve got the latest kids wear styles, up-to-the-minute decoration ideas and real-world examples of decorators who are successfully imitating hot celebrity styles.



Your Quirkiest Work

■ We went searching for the most unique work around the good old USA, and we definitely found it. Next issue, get ready to meet up with some extremely unique nichepreneurs.

Avoid These Seven Deadly Sins

■ Well, the seven deadly sins of website design, that is. You’ll learn how to turn your so-so website into a money-making machine. (Want a hint about one of the deadly sins? A pretty site with a navigation plan that leads nowhere.)

And much, much more!

needle watch

Needle Patrol



Our friend Slick (an embroidery machine needle) has hidden himself somewhere in this issue. He might be in an editorial photo, graphic or text—he’s not in an advertisement. If you find the needle, send us a note that says, “I found the July needle on page XX,” along with your name, company, address and phone number (or e-mail address) so we can contact you if you’re the winner, and mail or fax it to us at Stitches, Attn: Needle Patrol, 4800 Street Rd., Trevo, PA 19053; fax: (215) 953-3107. Also, tell us a little about your business. No phone calls please; you must respond in writing. Hurry! Responses for the July needle are due by July 30. From the correct responses, we’ll randomly select one winner who’ll receive a \$100 gift certificate, courtesy of **MADERA** Laconia, NH. Please submit only one entry per drawing. We’ll announce the winner in the September/October issue.

Slick’s Looking to the Future

In the May issue, Slick hid in the Stitches State of the Industry 2010’s “A Look Ahead” section near the multimedia and higher-end decoration trends coverage on page 59. Karen Firoz of KLF Crafts was chosen at random from a grand total of 45 responses. As this issue’s winner, Karen will receive Madeira USA’s gift certificate. Keep your eyes peeled for the industry’s favorite game of hide and seek!