

Reaping What They Sew

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Fashion designer and sewing expert Angie Cohen harnessed her experience and enthusiasm to bring a unique educational opportunity to children.

A simple premise—that children need more creative encouragement and training than they currently get in the school system—led Angie Cohen to create DesignLab Miami, a unique program that introduces youngsters to the world of fashion, design and sewing.

Founded in 2010 by Cohen, a graduate of New York's famed Fashion Institute of Technology and a veteran of designer brands including Calvin Klein and J.G. Hook, DesignLab Miami cultivates young, creative minds by teaching them to do old-fashioned things that used to be taught under the banner of "home economics."

But in an era of tight educational budgets, such fundamental education is being denied to many children, Cohen says. She started DesignLab to address the issue. "For many, many years, I wanted to start something for kids," Cohen says. "I have a tremendous amount of experience, from working with design houses to collaborating with other creative people in textiles and sewing. So I kept hoping that one day I would find a way to pass that knowledge on to kids. I opened DesignLab to do that and to create an environment where children could be encouraged to be creative."

She started humbly, hosting small private classes for children. "But I realized very quickly what an amazing and rewarding experience it is when you set out to empower children and give them a sense that they can do anything they want in this world if they are really motivated," she says. "And it really made me feel good to do that."

Cohen's early success was based on word-of-mouth promotion, so she quickly decided to build on the awareness she had and create a design studio and a formal program. Although she also attracts some adult participants, about 90 percent of her clients are children, aged 6 and up through high school. "We start with baby steps and show people every single step that is involved in the design and sewing of clothing," Cohen says. "And our participants end up with all the skills they need to design and sew clothing and accessories all by themselves. When they start, they have no idea how to measure fabric or cut it or sew. But by the time they're done, they're amazed at what they can do."

Tuition is \$178 per month for up to four individual classes. "And we provide everything the student needs," Cohen says. "They complete four or five projects per session. So when they finish, they take home the things they have created." Cohen is now hoping to be able to offer more scholarships. "I want to be able to do that, because I have a lot of kids that would like to come but can't afford it," she says.

She is also now looking for investors in order to expand to other locations in Florida, as well as across the U.S. and around the world. "I hope I'll be able to find investors who understand my idea and can visualize it being expanded nationally and worldwide," says Cohen, who also hopes to incorporate the DesignLab concept into both public and private schools. She currently teaches textile, design and sewing classes at Miami County Day School and Bay Harbor Elementary School.

Her current focus is on expanding a "Sewing for Smiles" program that encourages adult women volunteers to come in one day a week and sew pillow cases, stuffed animals and toiletry bags for orphanages in Florida and in South Africa. "We provide everything the volunteers need, including coffee and donuts," Cohen says. "And it is such a good program; it does so much good for children that I want to put more effort into it."

Cohen is also expanding her popular sewing parties. "They are a very unique way to celebrate any occasion," she says. "You make something fabulous and create memories with loved ones." DesignLab offers several packages for groups of all sizes. "Participants become fashion designers for a day," she says. "And you can do it at my studio or in your home, thanks to our new 'sewing van.'"

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