



ANGIE COHEN

A dress of recycled materials that was designed by students.



WEIRD SCIENCE

Angie Cohen's DesignLab Miami's students have lofty fashion aspirations, from launching entire design businesses in elementary school to creating sustainable clothing. This year, she's taking her passion to South America to help poverty-stricken teenage mothers and their children.

By Michelle Payer | Photographs by Carlos Hidalgo



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A 3-D printer used by students in the design process; a student concept sketch hangs on the wall; this swimsuit disintegrates after three months; the downstairs work room.



A laser-cut gelatin bathing suit that disintegrates in three months? Why not? We wanted a new one anyway, and we can plant this stylish one-piece in the vegetable garden to help the environment. How about a jacket made of bacteria, or a dress from fermented kombucha? If this sounds like the work of a mad scientist, it isn't the only thing literally "cooking" at DesignLab Miami, a creative design studio founded and run by Colombian-native and Bay Harbor Islands resident Angie Cohen.

A graduate of New York's renowned Fashion Institute of Technology, Cohen cut her teeth at design houses including Calvin Klein and JG Hook before moving to Miami with her underwater-photographer husband. She sewed with her kids, but missed designing and working with new technologies she knew were overtaking traditional methods. So Cohen began to map out a lab "to change the way the fashion industry is moving toward fast fashion and a system of linear production with underpaid workers," explains Cohen. "I wanted to merge new technology and laser printing, be on the cutting edge of creativity with biotechnology and come up with new resources to help change the planet," she says.

In 2010, Cohen opened DesignLab. Suddenly, recycling and sustainability joined upcycling and "bio-couture" as a hot new trend. Young entrepreneurs, students and adults heard about Cohen's innovative studio and teaching methods and flocked the deceptively large space in a nondescript North Miami



Instructors huddle together in the upstairs work room, where the printers and the laser cutter are kept.

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Beach strip mall to learn the basics of sewing, or create new designs and entire collections. Upon first learning sewing techniques, they may come away with a clutch or drawstring bag and undoubtedly be proud of it, as many of us recall from eighth-grade sewing class. Only here, it is so much more.

Eleven-year-old Zoe has been a DesignLab student for nearly a year. A complete neophyte when she began this new adventure, she had an eye for fashion and wanted to go beyond what she could find in department stores. After learning the basics, she progressed to currently making a sustainable-fabric dress using a plastic bag material called Tyvec, which is most often used to insulate buildings, with a recycled plastic skirt overlay. One-of-a-kind never looked so eco-chic.

While one adult student may simply want to learn how to hem his pants, the sky is the limit for other students. Teenager Ariel Swedroe,

granddaughter of the notable Miami architect Robert Swedroe, was a DesignLab student who used her grandfather's designs to create fabric, which morphed into a stand-alone collection that debuted at Art Basel. She now has a couture design house next door to DesignLab where she creates made-to-order clothing, swimsuits and coverups for clients and is close enough to visit her mentor. "Even though this is my livelihood, this is a family," says Cohen about DesignLab and her devoted students, who are clearly happy to be there and experiment with the laser cutter, 3-D printers, 18 sewing machines and thousands of bolts of fabric from every city Cohen visits.

Students and adults ranging in age from 7 to 70 take a series of six two-hour classes (separate adult and children's sessions) that start with the basics and include all the materials. It is a refuge for many, as Cohen describes a young gay man who struggles with acceptance

INSPIRATION



FROM LEFT: Cohen is all about Inspiration and has reminders for her students in their midst; this pair of sandals that was cut with the laser has recyclable soles; footwear created by students using juice boxes and the reclaimed soles of flip-flops and sneakers.



at a local high school. At DesignLab, fellow students celebrate his creativity and design ideas.

Besides learning textiles, fashion and innovation, Cohen says DesignLab provides "the mending of people" in a safe haven of sorts. "Adults tell me, 'If you had nurtured me, perhaps my life would have been different,'" she says. Some talk through issues of the day while sewing in a coffee klatch environment that dates back centuries. "Our primary goal is to encourage kids and adults to unleash their own potential," notes Cohen. "I tell them, anything is possible. There are no boundaries to your creativity, regardless of what you may have been told in the past. It's the most incredible feeling to see joy in freedom of expression."

Every student is at a different level learning myriad things, Cohen explains about the beehive of activity inside the Lab. "Everyone looks and watches the others and shares knowledge to continue the learning process organically." One of her biggest joys is DesignLab's innovative setting, where there is structure and a foundation, yet liberty to try new things. "For me, the whole point is to have a creative outlet; if what you initially envisioned doesn't work out, something exciting comes out of it," she says about patterns and the new design technologies that set the students' imaginations on fire.

Not solely limited to fabrics, laser and 3-D, Cohen teaches students

electronics to learn circuitry and how to conduct electricity to incorporate into their designs. Like a mad scientist, she demonstrates as tiny lights flash on and off the lily pad in her "e-sewing" creation. Cohen created one such design, a fiberoptic wedding gown that changes color from a Smartphone command, with a team of female engineers at FIU. A bride wore the dress, which is now displayed at the Jewish Museum of Florida.

A natural-born nurturer, Cohen has incorporated sewing (what used to be called "Home Economics" and is now known as "Esteem" programs) into two Miami-Dade schools, Ojus Elementary and Bay Harbor Elementary, where students created their own textiles and learned about the Everglades and sustainability. She says no Miami-Dade school has machinery or technology matching DesignLab, and she'd like to work with Title 1 (low-income) schools in the future.

Later this year, Cohen is heading to Colombia with her friend Paola Villamizar to donate fabric, a dozen sewing machines and her time to teach at Juan Fe, a non-profit organization that seeks to improve the quality of life of children and teenage mothers living in extreme poverty. She hopes each lesson is a step toward transforming a life. "I tell my students, 'You have to dream big,'" says Cohen about the business she runs with boundless energy and passion. "There is no formula; there is just desire," she says, "and this is a place where you can be anything." ■