



OUR GORGE : STYLE + DESIGN

Not Your Dad's Thrift Shop

A new company in Cascade Locks is reimagining the lifespan of our outdoor clothes **STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID HANSON**

Down a dead-end road in Cascade Locks there is a new kind of thrift store with a half-million dollar washing machine and a small team of seamstresses and salespeople hoping to expand the life of our clothes. The 7,500 square foot warehouse's towering metal racks hold cardboard boxes of used dungarees, fleece sweaters, long underwear and flannel shirts. Bright lights illuminate a handful of sewing tables where three women repair fabric tears and stitch The Renewal Workshop (TRW) labels into recently cleaned clothes. A makeshift photo studio shoots images for the TRW website catalogue. The \$500,000 Tersus washing machine uses state-of-the-art waterless technology to clean clothes to almost-new without using a drop of water.



The idea is simple: TRW partners with, for now, five clothing brands: Ibex, Prana, Mountain Khakis, Toad & Co. and Indigenous. The brands send TRW their returned merchandise, TRW cleans and repairs minor issues, rebrands the item and sells it via their own e-commerce site at a 30 to 40 percent discount off original price.

"We call it *re-commerce*," Nicole Bassett says. The Renewal Workshop is the brainchild of Bassett and Jeff Denby. The two friends, both Canadians, have been in the apparel industry for almost two decades. Denby started PACT, a line of underwear made with organic cotton. Bassett worked for Patagonia and, more recently, Prana



The Renewal Workshop co-founders Nicole Bassett and Jeff Denby, *opposite top*, pose with renewed outerwear at their Cascade Locks warehouse. The business partners moved into the 7,500-square-foot warehouse less than a year ago, *inset*. Seamstress Ofelia Gandara Munoz, *opposite bottom and above*, works on small repairs and sews TRW labels into clothing. Employee Dave Russell, retrieves clothing from the waterless Tersus washing machine, *top*, and works in the company's makeshift photo studio, *above right*.

where she managed supply chain sustainability (essentially, keeping the path from source to customer as ethical and environmentally efficient as possible).

Denby and Bassett knew the apparel business and, despite their roles as sustainability stalwarts, they saw massive inefficiencies and opportunities that could be addressed by first understanding the industry's back end: what happens to the clothing items once they're returned to the companies?

"Every single one of us, until we started this company, didn't think about where does this stuff go when I return it back to the company because of an issue," Bassett says. "You're more in the moment of 'I bought this for a certain reason and it didn't perform to my expectations and it's my right to give it back and you give me a new one.' And the outdoor industry has been fantastic about building lifetime warranties. But now those commitments have generated a lot of byproduct."

Between 1999 and 2009 the volume of textile waste rose by 40 percent with the EPA estimating 15.1 million tons generated in 2013. Charities such as Goodwill and Salvation Army simply cannot keep up with that volume, selling roughly 80 percent of the donated textiles to for-profit companies that shred the material for use in last-step products like insulation, carpet padding or industrial rags. And the fashion industry continues to find new ways to encourage more buying. "Fast fashion" means brands like H&M and Gap roll out a dozen new styles a year, mostly lower quality products intended to be discarded quickly — or returned to the companies via vaunted recycling campaigns that often encourage new purchases and contribute to the mountain of returned clothing.

Hipsters and millennials have been beating the drum over waste and injustice in the clothing industry for years. Fashion Revolution Week's annual April 24th social media campaign came about as a call for ethical sourcing following a Bangladesh factory collapse in 2013. Patagonia's 2011 "Don't Buy

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This Jacket” campaign and its ongoing Worn Wear initiative to repair old items have discouraged buying new. Even Macklemore’s “Thrift Shop” pimped reuse, aka upcycling.

The social media pulse #haulalternative encourages fashion vloggers to post videos of their creations utilizing upcycling, swaps or charity shops. There’s a positive environmental story to tell with re-commerce, especially for the outdoor brands TRW is targeting who know that selling a feel-good story is perhaps more effective than selling a particular design or fabric or the tenth new “style” of the year.

For Cascade Locks, the opening of TRW is positive news following the contentious decision in early 2016 to prohibit Nestlé from opening a bottling plant in the town. Jobs and tax revenue are a major priority, but with Nestlé, heavy semi-truck traffic and basic apprehension about relinquishing a pristine water source proved too concerning for voters. TRW’s commitment to low water use (they do use a conventional washing machine for delicate clothing items like seam-sealed jackets) was a welcome addition.

For Denby and Bassett, Cascade Locks offered an affordable space and a manageable distance to Portland for shipping. TRW doesn’t plan to expand too much in Cascade Locks, preferring to replicate the same space around the U.S. in order to reduce transportation costs and environmental impact.

“The venture capitalists probably needed to get out a map to find Cascade Locks,” Bassett says. She and Denby’s industry connections solidified backing from two major investors. On the grassroots side, an Indiegogo campaign pre-sold reused clothing as a way to ramp production and



The Renewal Workshop co-founders established their business in Cascade Locks for its affordability and proximity to Portland for shipping ease. As the business grows, the partners plan to replicate the space in other locations rather than expand locally in order to reduce transportation costs and environmental impact.

begin telling the story of TRW and reuse. The end game for TRW is not to be a high-end thrift shop. They hope to learn about the back-end of the clothing life cycle so they can provide the data to companies looking to improve their front-end.

“If the brands own their products through the entire life cycle, they’ll learn so much more about how to design better product,” Bassett says. “And there’s a chance in the long run that they could make their new product from their old product. So your old polyester hiking pants that are totally trashed could get shredded and refabricated into new polyester yarn to be threaded into new pants.”

“You can keep getting rid of it but at some point it has to go somewhere,” Bassett adds. “Are you designing it to go somewhere good?”

For more information, go to therenewalworkshop.com

David Hanson is a writer, photographer and video producer based in Hood River. Find his editorial and commercial work at ModocStories.com and weddings at CascadiaStudios.com.

