



# Sense of Place: This season, take “buy local” a step further with “made local”

OCTOBER 30, 2023 | by M. Diane McCormick

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Stay Apparel

Buy a Stay Apparel made-in-America T-shirt—maybe the one printed with the vintage Helb’s Lager Beer label—and get a bonus “tale of the tee.”

“I can tell customers that Helb’s Beer in York was a pioneer in using electric vehicles in the early 1900s,” said Neal Goulet, founder of Hershey-based Stay Apparel. “I didn’t know that when we started out, but that’s a really cool part of the story. I go to the trouble of researching those old brands and finding a story behind the designs because so much of shopping retail is so antiseptic these days. There’s added value in having a story. People want to engage.”

In a tsunami of fast fashion, locally made apparel is a raindrop, but three area producers agree that local wearables promise durability, unique style, warm fuzzies from supporting a local business, and maybe a really good story.

Goulet is a career journalist and communicator who started diversifying the blog of his PR firm, Goulet Communications, with posts on his passion for buying American-made products. Deciding to put “skin in the game,” he launched Stay Apparel in October 2017. Every item is made in the U.S. and “has a sense of place.”

Stay Apparel’s T-shirts, hats and accessories mix vintage and original designs, from an original “Sas-Q-Valley, Pennsylvania Bigfoot Believers” imprint to the resurrections of long-gone, local bars and breweries, including the former Harrisburg juggernaut Graupner’s.

“I really like local history, especially the businesses,” Goulet said. “I find it kind of heartbreaking when you think of somebody who starts a business, especially a consumer-facing brand that’s successful for decades. Someday it closes, and 10 years later, nobody knows anything about it. They all have cool stories.”

Chantal Nga Eloundou, owner of Nyianga Store in Midtown Harrisburg, was selling her handmade jewelry at Broad Street Market when repeat customers suggested that she add clothing from her native Africa. She scouted events in Philadelphia and Maryland for African clothing and realized she could bring her own design aesthetic to vibrant African fabrics.

Today, she sources substantial cotton textiles from Africa, sewn by Nigerian women into colorful skirts, dresses, head wraps and dashikis.

“It’s a global world,” she said. “My customers want African products. I want them to be on the same page of what’s trending in Africa. I want them on the same page right here in Harrisburg, right here in Pennsylvania, right here in the United States.”

Eloundou’s customers are growing in diversity, as buyers of all ethnicities cotton to her unique looks. When an almost-apologetic white customer said he didn’t feel he belonged in her shop, she told him, “You belong here no less than anybody else.”

“We need to share cultures,” she told TheBurg. “We respect other cultures and share them as a community, as mankind.”



Justin Workman. Photo by Jillian and Ryan McGrath.

## **Pushing Boundaries**

Joelle and Justin Workman, the husband-and-wife team behind Fennec Design, met as musicians. At the time, he was also screen-printing T-shirts for fellow musicians, and she was drawing intricate doodles. They put her designs on his T-shirts and took a supply to a music festival, figuring the sales would help pay for gas.

“We were pleasantly surprised when we got a really positive response,” Justin said. “We thought it was something we could do together.”

Moving from Philadelphia to join friends in Harrisburg brought down their cost of living and connected them with a supportive community. They sell their T-shirts, tanks, hoodies and bottoms online, in boutiques, wholesale and in their Millworks studio in Midtown Harrisburg.

While larger businesses cling to their prefab menus of options, local apparel makers have the leeway to get creative, Justin said. He notes the close relationship they developed with Elementary Coffee owner Andrea Grove to print their own coffee packaging.

“We’re always pushing the boundary of what can we produce ourselves,” he said. “It’s a matter of coming in and getting plugged into the community, making friends with other business owners, and seeing what we can do for each other. It’s not just treating people with, ‘Here’s what I have to sell to you.’ You approach people with a genuine sense of interest in what they’re doing.”

Justin specializes in screen-printing with water-based inks—more complex to handle but also more sustainable and durable than the industry-standard, cracking-prone, petroleum-based inks. Joelle spends weeks studying her subjects before designing what looks like God’s elaborate blueprint of a cicada, rabbit or carnivorous plant. Some customers just like the artwork. Others are experts in their fields—an entomologist, perhaps—fascinated by her take on the subject they have studied for years.

“It allows for these strange, mercurial points of connection you never would have anticipated having,” she said.

Wardrobes once consisted of a few quality items that lasted for years, said the Workmans. That era devolved into today’s “deep undervaluing of fashion as a commodity,” Joelle said. Clothing from a local maker offers a narrative and “better quality for your buck.”

“You are engaging with a more humanizing side of our industry,” she said. “It’s not just some T-shirt you pick up off the rack where you run into 20 other people wearing it. You’re buying something with a greater uniqueness.”

## Relationships

Originally, Goulet thought his business would thrive through online sales, but he has learned that makers markets and pop-up shops—in Harrisburg, Hershey, State College, Bucks County, Lewisburg, Lancaster, York—help forge connections with customers and fellow makers and artisans.

The experience prompted Goulet to curate and produce his own holiday artisan shopping experience with The Englewood Makers Market, Dec. 3 at The Englewood in Hershey. None of the 22 vendors are duplicates of another. The 2022 edition went so well that all but one vendor is returning, and several new ones have been added.

From “day one,” he also has forged a partnership with the Hershey History Center—a perfect fit for his vintage vibe. This year, that partnership is blossoming with the Holly Jolly Trolley Stop Pop-Up Shop. It was Goulet’s idea for utilizing the center’s historic trolley stop as a holiday pop-up selling his apparel and curated gift items—all made in America, of course. There will be wooden log toys made in Maine, tin toys from Pittsburgh, and other “cool, classic sort-of heirloom things.”

“It’s about history and honoring the past,” he said.

Yes, Goulet admits, “Nobody needs another T-shirt.” But his shirts are made by Royal Apparel in Long Island, and Lancaster-based Unique Apparel has printed every Stay Apparel shirt.

“I’m sure I could find a cheaper printer, but that’s not what motivates me,” he said. “I like the relationship, and I like the quality.”

Companies that claim it’s impossible to source American-made supplies are “not trying hard enough,” he added.

“There’s an easy way to do it, but we’ve seen a lot of where that gets us when we drive around Pennsylvania or Maine, and you see these hollowed-out towns,” Goulet said. “It’s because people aren’t making things.”

Goulet's passion has turned him into a disciplined shopper, buying only American-made products when possible.

“A lot of the jadedness people feel today is that they're not listened to or heard by their public officials,” he said. “Well, you have the power of the purse. It's one way you can feel empowered. You don't have to give your money to the chain that's importing everything. I just like the label, the quiet confidence of knowing that what you're wearing is American made.”



Chantal Nga Eloundou

Customer support keeps local apparel makers in business, said Eloundou.

“Buying local gives the sense of being useful and being part of the community,” she said. “When we spend in the community, the money stays in the community. That's how we become stronger. You buy from me, and I go next door to buy something from the grocery store. That's how we keep it lively.”

*For more information on Stay Apparel, visit [www.stayapparel.com](http://www.stayapparel.com) (<http://www.stayapparel.com>).*

*Nyanga Store is located at 1423 N. 3rd St., Harrisburg. For more information, visit their Facebook or Instagram pages.*

*Fennec Design is located in The Millworks, 340 Verbeke St., Harrisburg. For more information, visit [www.fennecdesign.com](http://www.fennecdesign.com) (<http://www.fennecdesign.com>).*

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March 28, 2024 | by M. Diane McCormick

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