Dressing with Pride: Clothing for the Elderly and Disabled
Evelyn Kennedy Commentucci, Sewtique
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Summary by Salem Amanda Moritz

Evelyn Kennedy Commentucci, the founder of Sewtique, presented the University of Rhode Island’s TMD students with samples of her clothing designs for the elderly and disabled that she made in the 1950s. Having experienced three years of her life with a full leg cast and forearm crutches, Evelyn was well aware of the struggles of a handicapped person, especially when it came to dressing. From there, she was inspired to design and alter traditional clothing so it is not only more comfortable and practical, but also stylish.

Evelyn first told us about a group of four girls she had worked with who lived in an institution for disabled children. She described them as being completely dependent on their caretakers and having “no daily living skills.” Evelyn was determined to change that. In order to help these girls learn to dress themselves she began by giving them large squares of fabric with buttons, snaps, or Velcro. By practicing with these weekly, they further developed their fine motor coordination. Eventually, the girls were given special dresses designed and created by Evelyn that opened and closed with the same closures they had practiced on, and the girls were able to dress themselves much more independently than before.

Then Evelyn began thinking about other types of clothing that could use improvement for children with varying forms of disabilities. She started by taking ready-to-wear clothing and making alterations so they could more easily be put on and taken off, such as zippers to open the neckline for sleeve access, or extending a zipper to the toe of a onesie instead of it ending at the hip. Even doing something as simple as adding a snap to the peak of an undershirt strap was an improvement. In addition, Evelyn was very conscious about the cost of these garments for the families with disabled children, so the alterations were made to be affordable. Therefore, not only were these improvements good for the disabled children, but they assisted the families and caretakers of such children in more ways than one.

While Evelyn was working on these garments for children, she was still on crutches herself, and thus began designing for adults with disabilities. She made a couple of sleeveless jackets with matching cape-like shawls that were fashionable, warm, and helped hide her forearm crutches. For an associate of hers who used a wheelchair, Evelyn created an open-back dress with skirt extension as formal wear, and for when the weather was cold, she also made a matching cape shawl and skirt. Not only that, Evelyn made several adjustments to menswear. For formal menswear, she cleverly added Velcro behind the butt ons of a formal shirt so it appeared to be buttoned closed, and added a clip on tie that was easier to use. In addition, she altered a suit to be easier for a wheelchair user to undress for the toilet. Evelyn added zippers to the sides of the pants so the back could be dropped and an elastic waistband kept the rest of the pants up. For the jacket, she again added zippers to the end of the suit sleeves and a little bit up the sides, to increase the ease of putting it on in a seated position and/or with an arm cast.

Evelyn Kennedy Commentucci’s work is a great example of someone seeing an unfulfilled need and creating a solution. Her simple design improvements made it easier for the elderly and disabled to dress themselves, and furthermore, made them feel good about the clothes they were wearing. The fact that their garments were now not only functional, but also fashionable, increased their morale despite their challenging circumstances. As Evelyn so enthusiastically said herself, “I put dignity back into their clothing!”