

Kathryn Greenwood Swanson Wants to Raid Your Craft Closet

by Clark Tate | Apr 4, 2022



Kathryn Swanson resells used fabrics through her business Swanson Fabrics.

Running a fabric thriftstore isn't the most intuitive way to launch a revolution. But Kathryn Greenwood Swanson, owner and operator of Swanson Fabrics in Turner Falls, Massachusetts, makes it feel like one. Instead of linking the US dollar to gold, a practice [that Nixon ended](#) just over 50 years ago, she's linking it to fiber. In her world, bills are backed by fabric and building wealth means building community.

Swanson is on a mission to make sewing affordable again, by freeing high-quality fibers from closets and passing goods from our fabric-wealthy elders to the creative hands of our youth. Swanson sells everything for four dollars a yard, period, from synthetic blends to 14th century lace. As a thrift store, she sources her fabrics for free. But that doesn't make high-quality fabric any less valuable in the traditional market.

"It's really hard to steal yourself against wanting to inflate prices," Swanson says. "But it helps everyone stay as generous as possible."

"The fabric is an endless resource," says Swanson. "The only thing that I spend money on is people's time to 'file' the fabric." It's not the simplest of tasks. "I am a distracted, disorganized person," says Swanson. So she relies heavily on her staff – often friends, family and volunteers. Some are paid traditionally, in dollars. "I am as generous as I can be," says Swanson. "I like to offer my friends and family more money than a contractor, and about half the time they take it."

Others are paid in fabric. "I have printed up Monopoly money that says one yard, three yards, 10 yards," says Swanson. "And I like to tell people that this is backed more strongly by durable goods than any currency that any federal government could offer you right now." But Swanson thinks the best deal is the access to new arrivals. "With our flat pricing, we've removed money as a tool," she says. "If you come help, you get the first look at the stuff, and that is really the only thing of value, since the fabric is so cheap."

"If all the systems fail, I'm gonna be dressed in silk and velvet at least," says Swanson. "And I have an entire community that is already trained in mutual aid." That is no small feat. [Such support systems](#) are proving to be an important buffer to the impacts of increasingly frequent catastrophes, from Covid-19 to extreme weather.



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The idea

“I am the daughter of a costume designer,” Swanson says. “I sort of grew up in the fiber arts.” She often went to work with her Mom at night at the community theater in Washington DC. After attending Hampshire College, she worked as a prop artisan at the CENTER STAGE in Baltimore, where she learned to upholster.

Along the way, she toured the homes of many fiber artists. Most brimmed with unused fibers. The memory serves as a first, informal inventory for her business.

“I just know how much fiber artists and sewers are holding onto,” says Swanson.

“I had a suspicion that everyone collected so much,” she says, “because they didn’t have people to pass it down to.” It seemed stressful. “They would talk about it in sort of an addiction way, as if it was weighing on them,” says Swanson. “I also know that we are everywhere, that fiber artists are ubiquitous,” she says. In these two truths, she saw a need to bridge the gap between a clear demand and a massive, free supply.

Owning her own business has been a lifelong dream. Like so many others, the pandemic gave her the opportunity. In early 2020, she was working as a first grade teacher, with plans in place to take a new position teaching kids to sew. Wildly enough, at a time when the world was getting a crash course in mask making, they canceled the position.

She took her stimulus check, contacted a friend who regularly scoured Facebook Marketplace for fiber stashes, and found one woman willing to donate a house full of fabric. With it, Swanson held three, socially distanced tag sales during Memorial day weekend of 2020. Most of her customers were making masks. She sold everything at \$2.50 a yard and cleared \$1,000 each day. “It gave me enough to really say, ‘Okay, I’m gonna go get a storefront,’” says Swanson. Now she has a fabric bin free to anyone under 18, because she thinks kids should learn to sew.





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The Model

Swanson's fabric store enjoyed quick success. She credits her community. Early on, she asked people to buy gift certificates to help her get started. Buy them they did, effectively giving her an interest-free loan. Where some businesses might struggle to cover the costs of inventory when a gift certificate comes to call months later, Swanson Fabrics simply hands over the fiber. Since her inventory is free to her and abundant, it's easy to pay down the loan. The moral support didn't hurt either. "It felt wonderful," says Swanson. It didn't hurt that rent was temporarily reduced in the early days due to Covid.

Swanson is not at all worried that the supply of donated fabrics will flag. Sure, she is importing fabrics from neighboring states, like New Jersey. But Swanson maintains, that her small town alone would sustain the business model. "When I'm selling people all this fabric, so inexpensively. They can afford to take as much of it as they want," she says. Their stash builds. They don't use it all. And some of it comes back to the store.

"My customers, their homes are the auxiliary storage of the shop," she says. "If this all keeps cycling and running beautifully, my place is just sort of a trading post."

Swanson likes the work. "There is magic every single day. I believe in ghosts and spirits now more than any other time in my life," she says. Serendipity abounds. When someone walks in with a fabric wish, it's often granted by a random donation within the week. When the store received a large donation of antique lace, a textile lace historian from Historic Deerfield wandered in the next day, dating some of the materials to the 14th century. They sold for four dollars like everything else.

Businesswise "its going really well," says Swanson. "There's such a void in the world for this. Children are really eager to learn, grownups are eager to learn, and the people who can teach it are dying out," she says. "I do believe the most effective way to make money in the fiber arts is to, in whatever way, enable the home sewer."



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The Vision

But she's not interested in too much success. "I will not franchise," she says. "I don't want to work that hard. I want to have a nice life." She does have a larger vision though and is currently running a monthly business group for people interested in replicating her model. "We've discovered a natural resource in our midst," she says.

"It's not creating any new exploitation of humans or the planet, and it's the best stuff, and it's the least expensive. I mean, it's just totally like a win, win, win, win, win."

Though she does sell online, she doesn't move product unless she posts a video about it on TikTok, "I know that's ephemeral," she says. "And I don't want it to be the backbone of my business. I want my brick and mortar to be the strongest part. And I want these shops all over the country."

Swanson has a profound respect for the place that fabric holds in our lives. "Making fabric is really hard to do," she says. She feels she's providing a service to our elders as they downsize, easing them through an emotional process. "I ask them lots of questions about their fabrics," she says, both for her own edification and for theirs. "I let them know we're going to find them a great place."

New fabrics and accessories drop every Monday and Thursday at 8 pm Eastern Standard Time.

Clark Tate

contributor

Clark Tate is a freelance writer and lifelong knitter. After graduating from never-ending scarves to more complex projects, Clark also graduated with a Master's in Environmental Science. She then worked as a restoration ecologist for six years, before moving on to an obsession with braided hats and writing articles about people and the environments they live in. She's written for Hakai Magazine, Summit Daily News, Salt Lake City Weekly, and [GearLab.com](#). You can find further examples of her work at [lclarktate.com](#).

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Contact Us

hello@craftindustryalliance.org

617-216-5296

P.O. Box 812397

Wellesley, MA 02482



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