Norton School Director Has Passion for Sustainable Fashion

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February is a big month for fashion, with Fashion Week runway shows taking place in New York, Paris, London and, beginning this week, Milan.

It might also be an appropriate time to reflect on consumer trends in the fashion industry — something that is always on the mind of Jana Hawley, director of the UA’s John and Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences [1].

As director of the school, in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences [2], Hawley’s research focuses largely on sustainability in the clothing industry and textile recycling.

"I started doing recycling research in the late '90s when I was an assistant professor at the University of North Texas," Hawley said. "I chose the topic because my background is in fashion, but I wanted my work to be more meaningful. I wanted to contribute (research) to some of the issues that the industry has, and one of those issues is overconsumption and, therefore, too much waste."

Americans throw away an estimated 13 million tons of textiles each year, much of which ends up in landfills — something Hawley is hoping to change through consumer education.

Overconsumption of clothing is in many ways an American problem. In Europe, for example, consumers are more likely to invest in a small number of high-quality clothing pieces, while Americans are more likely to load their closets with lots of inexpensive items, Hawley said. Companies have responded by lowering prices or giving the illusion of markdowns to appeal to bargain shoppers.

"It used to be that consumers would think about what was in their closet and they would add a piece to complement what was in a closet. Now they just go out and buy, buy, buy," Hawley said. "It's part of the pricing strategy for a lot of companies to price things initially to make it look like they're marking them down right away."

To accommodate Americans' clothing habit, homebuilders have even started making closets bigger, Hawley said.

"If you think about a new house in America today, it always has a walk-in closet, while if you think about houses built in the '50s, closets were small," Hawley said.

To combat overconsumption and the waste that comes with it, Hawley advocates a return to the mid-20th century American trend of "wardrobe building," or buying a few high-quality, classic items that complement what you already have in your closet.
"What I would say to consumers is to figure out how much you spend a year on clothing and instead of buying 150 pieces for that money, invest the same amount in a few good pieces that last over time," she said. "Think about timeless designs that are not 'trendy,' and then answer your trend needs with accessories instead of more clothing."

Also important, Hawley said, is to be responsible when discarding clothing. When the time comes to get rid of something you no longer wear, you should always take it to your favorite charity rather than throw it in the garbage, no matter what condition it's in.

Most charities that accept clothing have relationships with recycling companies, so any clothes they can't use or resell go on to recycling facilities where they may find new life as blankets, shop rags, auto carpeting, housing insulation, construction materials and more. Following the Exxon Valdez oil spill, Hawley said, mixed-fiber oil booms placed along the shoreline to capture oil were made partly of recycled textiles, so you never know where your old T-shirt might end up.

Another way to be a responsible consumer is to research and support companies that operate with sustainability in mind, Hawley said.

Hawley herself is a big supporter of the clothing company Eileen Fisher, which embraces wardrobe building by creating new designs that match pieces from its previous seasons' collections. The company also has a takeback program, in which consumers can give back clothes they no longer want and the company will repair, clean and resell the items in its used clothing stores. Outdoor apparel retailer Patagonia has a similar takeback program, Hawley said.

"Our industry is burdened with a lot of environmental and social responsibility challenges," Hawley said. "Companies will change when consumers demand it, so for the last 20 years my goal has been to teach consumers to start demanding it."

Hawley, a Kansas native who joined the UA in 2015, has an undergraduate degree in home economics education, a master's degree in clothing and textiles, and a doctorate in textile and apparel management, with minors in cultural anthropology and international business. She serves on the board of the national Council for Textile Recycling and has done sustainability consulting for a number of major retailers, including Wal-Mart, Dillard's, Target and Kohl's.

While sustainability and textile recycling remain primary focus areas for Hawley, her efforts have also expanded to working with artisans in developing counties, some of whom use recycled materials to make their creations.

Hawley, who previously was a Fulbright Scholar in India, has worked mostly with women in India, Peru and Guatemala to help them design for a global market - educating them on things like American pricing and color and fit preferences. She plans to travel to Uzbekistan with a group of faculty next year to study textile arts and the materials used by artisans there.

"It's all about helping them tweak their designs so that they have a global marketplace," Hawley said. "It's so rewarding to build the friendships and help them grow their own economies."

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