A Q&A with Elizabeth Heuisler: Retired football jerseys return to the (fashion) field

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Retired University of Arizona football jerseys are finding new life as part of Arizona Replay, a clothing line featuring designs created by University students.

The line is the result of a collaboration between University of Arizona Marketing and Brand Management and the Norton School of Human Ecology, which offers a major called fashion industry's science and technology. Initial designs for the clothes are created by students in the Norton School's Apparel Production class, which was launched in 2019 under assistant professor of practice Elizabeth Heuisler. Over the years, students have designed everything from halter tops to purses, using locally thrifted clothing to create prototypes.

As part of the Apparel Production class, students pitch their products to Marc Herman, a University alumnus and the chief business development officer for Blue 84, a wholesale supplier of custom-designed apparel and accessories. After the class wraps, Heuisler sends Herman a box of student prototypes. Once he receives the prototypes, Herman begins the production process. After Herman conceptualizes final products, each garment is hand-stitched by his longtime collaborator Graciela Valle, using jerseys supplied by the University and thrifted apparel collected by Herman since the 1990s, resulting in items that are part jersey and part vintage clothing.

Heuisler spoke with Lo Que Pasa about starting Apparel Production, developing the Arizona Replay line and what she's learned from her students.

What is the Arizona Replay fashion line, and what is the story behind its creation and development?

Arizona Replay is a line of repurposed and upcycled game jerseys, and we are primarily using football jerseys. Marketing and Brand Management came to Charlette Padilla (associate professor of practice in the Norton School) with the materials when she was in charge of the fashion minor. Charlette came to me, and I knew it would work for an Apparel Production class. It's a perfect fit because we will take the designs from inception to manufacturing – and what a great real-life experience for students. They will get to talk to a manufacturer, see what licensing is about, and work with something they are familiar with. We put on a special topics class and then developed the Apparel Production class.

Take us through a semester of Apparel Production. How do the students go from drawing rough ideas and cutting up old football jerseys to submitting final designs at the end of the semester?

During the beginning of the class, we talk about consumers, and the students do a photo essay of the campus and its different consumer groups. They then work on rough sketches – some on Photoshop and Illustrator, while some draw sketches themselves – and then we go through the designs together and pick out 10 of them. From there, they work with the actual jerseys, cutting them apart and taking off all the patches, letters and pieces and seeing where they are going to apply them.

From there, they make the actual prototypes and then have to create a marketing plan, a cost plan and instructions for manufacturing. Through this whole process they are creating what we call a technical package, which includes a photo or drawing of their prototype, measurements, requirements and cost. They make presentations to Marc, and we treat it as a business pitch to a donor or sponsor who will give you $100,000 to develop your clothing line.

After we work with Marc, we send him the prototypes and he will work on them. When I call students later in the summer and tell them one of their designs was chosen as the basis for something, you can hear how excited they are.

You have likened the student response you have seen for this project, especially when they first start cutting up jerseys, to "sharks in a feeding frenzy." Can you explain what that means?

The first time I taught the class, I remember all of my students just standing there in front of the jerseys. I told them the designs wouldn't create themselves and encouraged them to start doing something. They would tell me what they wanted, I would tell them to start, and they would just look at me.

I called everyone around, took scissors and just started hacking and cutting into a jersey. I told them this sleeve would go there, I liked this collar here, and put it aside. You could see them – it was like they were holding their breath. Students finally started grabbing the jerseys and cutting and taking the patches and emblems off. It was such a great feeling because they finally got it – but then they couldn't stop. It's like sharks. They see a jersey and they just start cutting it up, and really good things come from that.

What do you hope students learn in this class?
The product is the endgame here – getting something to Marc that is usable and workable. And the students learn that they have to answer to somebody else. Answering to me as their professor or to their peers is one thing, but this is a third party. Marc is not grading them, and I am always amazed at how much effort they put into their work. It's not just about a grade. There's a certain amount of pride the students have in their work.

Upcycling and thrifting clothing are by no means new practices, but why do you think they have become more popular in recent years? Do you think they appeal more to younger generations?

Younger generations think that through thrifting and upcycling they are saving the world. Every generation wants to be the hero, and I think the environment is a big part of that for these students. It's their little part in saving the world. Also, these are products that already existed and were around, but upcycling presents an opportunity that is a little different: to make it your own and put your own stamp on it.

What are some of your favorite and most popular designs so far?

The denim jacket was taking something really simple – removing the number, emblems and logos from a jersey and putting it on the jacket – and making a nice product. We're in Arizona, so you think of cowboys and denim. We've got the Arizona flavor with the football jerseys. This year, they also made a pillow cover, and that's just a game jersey with a backing on it. You can take it to a game or just leave it on your couch.

Another item I really like is the purse they made from a jersey sleeve. I love that, and we're working on a price point for that right now.

Where and when will these products be available for purchase?

These products are available in pop-up shops, and the next one is planned for this year's Homecoming football game on Nov. 4.

(Visit University of Arizona News to learn more about Arizona Replay[1]).

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