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TOP STORY

## Tucson industrial sewing factory works to grow economy, careers

**Carmen Duarte**

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Student Tammie Espinosa, left, watches as instructor Marie Teemant helps get her overlocker sewing machine fine-tuned and ready to go while learning production sewing techniques at Arizona Stitch Lab.

Kelly Presnell, Arizona Daily Star

Carmen Duarte

**T**he whirring of sewing machines fills **Sonoran Stitch Factory** — a cut and sew manufacturer of women’s apparel and industrial sewn products for the health care industry, university and college dormitories, hotels, resorts and cruise ships — on Tucson’s north side.

Some workers sew medical hijabs for Muslim women in the medical field. The hijabs have slits over the ears for a stethoscope and also for a face mask. Others sew trail gaiters for runners and hikers to keep dirt and rocks out of their shoes.

And some sewers make shower curtains. Orders include pillow and mattress covers made out of vinyl and other commercial fabrics. Orders for items can go up to several thousand a month.

Erica Yngve is the entrepreneur behind the 25,000-square-foot facility at 625 W. Rillito St. — within the San Ignacio community of the Old Pascua Yaqui Village, near West Grant and North Oracle roads.

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Since 2020, the factory has grown to serve over two dozen apparel and sewn good companies across the country. Yngve employs 16 workers and Sonoran Stitch Factory, which has become Southern Arizona's largest cut and sew manufacturer, offers customers warehousing and assembling of their products on down to shipping docks to deliver their orders.

“This full service enables clients to focus on new product development, marketing and sales,” said Yngve, a 2000 University of Arizona graduate with two bachelor's degrees in business management and German studies, and a master's in business administration in 2005 from DePaul University in Chicago.

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Daisy Flowers has to get close to her work, getting the four threads on her overlocker sewing machine threaded right, while learning production sewing techniques at Arizona Stitch Lab.

Kelly Presnell, Arizona Daily Star

She believes Tucson can become a strong hub for industrial sewers — attracting more companies and growing the economy.

“I am very passionate about this. We have access to Mexico and the West Coast, and we can distribute throughout the country through package carriers, trucks, trains and planes,” said Yngve.

“More local brands in apparel are looking to manufacture domestically because of problems with the supply chain because of COVID-19. It has made it very difficult to manufacture off shore. There are lockdowns and backlogs in shipping,” explained Yngve.

Industrial sewing

## Closing the gap

She partnered with the city of Tucson, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe and MoonshotAz of Flagstaff, which is a program to help entrepreneurs develop their business, and created **Arizona Stitch Lab to train and certify sewers**. The lab is housed inside the Sonoran Stitch Factory. The lab, which has three instructors, provides a free workforce development program to address the skill gap in the industrial sewing trades. MoonshotAz, a nonprofit organization, is associated with the Northern Arizona Center for Entrepreneurship and Technology campus.

The city awarded \$300,000 over two years in economic stimulus monies to Arizona Stitch Lab to train participants in basic industrial sewing skills to ultimately revitalize the sewing hub in Tucson, said Yngve. Those accepted into the six-week course do not have to pay, she said. The course teaches students factory setting and machine safety protocols; industrial machine operations, including different stitch types; basic patterning, markers and cutting applications; introduction to fabrication; and materials and fabric handling. Future training will include sewing machine repair classes, and 3D pattern-making for apparel and interior design.

Upon completion, graduates are expected to start with wages of \$15 an hour and with experience climb to \$25 an hour. As training is extended, sewers have an annual earning potential of up to \$100,000, Yngve said. Graduates can look for job

opportunities in fields including aviation interiors, interior decoration, apparel production, shade sails and awnings, and upholstery. The program's goal is to train up to 100 students a year in industrial sewing.



Ameer Mehri, left, makes a button hole, and Rana Shaiq, right, works on a medical hijab at the Sonoran Stitch Factory.

Shekib Rahmani, Arizona Daily Star

For continued studies, the lab offers workshops and one-day intensive training throughout the year, such as apparel construction and introduction to shade sails. In the fall, the lab will launch a 10-week entrepreneur class for those who want to build their own sewing trade business.

The Pascua Yaqui Tribe is contributing up to \$50,000 this year to pay for supportive services for tribal members enrolled in the lab. It includes transportation and child care costs. The tribe also helped with the purchase of machines for instruction. Twenty tribal members have gone through the program. A total of 40 participants have graduated, and graduates range in age from 18 up to 65 and come from multicultural backgrounds.

Graduates include unemployed and underemployed workers on up to those with college degrees who are interested in starting their own businesses that require sewers to manufacture handbags, costumes and upcycling vintage clothing. Positions for sewers in Southern Arizona include industries that manufacture interior products such as upholstery, linens, curtains and pillows for private jets; interior decoration; shade sails for playgrounds and sail boats; awnings for commercial and residential structures; and upholstery businesses.

## **Passion for sewing**

Four recent graduates were hired by Sonoran Stitch Factory. One is Anthony Toro who enrolled in the program, along with his mother who also was hired by the factory to cut patterns for women's apparel.

"I liked the classes, and it was my first time sewing. I have made T-shirts, pillows, bandanas, shirt pockets, and have done some upholstery work for cars," said Toro, 25, a graduate of Pima Vocational High School, a charter school. "I want to learn as much as I can, and my dream is to do freelance upholstery manufacturing for the auto industry, or manufacture handbags and wallets."

Andrea Garcia, 23, a Cholla High Magnet School graduate, said she was "super excited and surprised" when she was hired by the factory after graduation from the lab. She is working on a team of four that produce 2,000 hiking and running gaiters a month. "I also am helping with packing and shipping products to customers throughout the United States," said Garcia. She also ships products for factory clients to Canada.

"I like this business. I began sewing when I was 15 after my grandmother suggested I sew clothing for our Virgin Mary statue of the Immaculate Conception," said Garcia, adding that her 90-year-old grandmother makes blankets, clothing for the family and also sews clothing for images of saints.

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Sergio Vargas cuts fabric at the Sonoran Stitch Factory, which hires industrial sewing machine operators.  
Shekib Rahmani, Arizona Daily Star

Yngve, who began sewing at age 9 when she was in 4-H, smiled when she heard about Garcia's grandmother and her love of sewing. She, too, is drawn to sewing and design, progressing to clothing alterations for friends, and sewing bridesmaids dresses and her own wedding dress. The native of Casper, Wyoming, moved as a child with her parents to Tucson, and is married and has three sons.

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## Arizona Stitch Lab

To find out more about Arizona Stitch Lab or to apply for the sewing program, go to [azstitchlab.org](http://azstitchlab.org) or call Sonoran Stitch Factory at 520-338-9738.

