

401 Counterculture: Pawtucket's Mode Merr

Rhode Island has fast become synonymous with creative small business. You can hardly find a street corner or loft office in the Providence or Warwick area not adorned with the humble and vibrant signs of local-owned businesses selling everything from artisan food to eclectic art and handmade furniture. One such office in Pawtucket holds the headquarters of Mode Merr, an independent handmade clothing label owned by designer Angela Zampell, who relocated her business to the Ocean State from New Hampshire in 2013. I sat down with Angela to discuss what it means to be both an alternative clothing designer and small business owner in Rhode Island.



Adam J Schirling: How would you describe the mission of Mode Merr Clothing?

Angela Zampell: Mode Merr is a handcrafted women's clothing line that caters to curvy ladies. We provide our customers with well-made, retro-with-a-twist designs that flatter real women's bodies.

AJS: What was your early inspiration for creating your own clothing line and how did fashion influence your early life?

AZ: My inspiration for creating Mode Merr was my love for vintage clothing and my frustration of not fitting into most of it. I was allowed to be very expressive with my clothing at a very early age and shopped almost exclusively at thrift shops and vintage stores in Boston. I would then deconstruct my

finds to make flattering creations for my friends and me.

AJS: Was it always your idea to provide the signature retro edge and wide range of size availability Mode Merr is known for?

AZ: Mode Merr has always offered all of our designs in sizes xxs - xxxl. This started early because my friends were my first customers. I still love it when a person transforms while wearing Mode Merr, which would not be possible if I made a limited size selection. My designs have always had a vintage flair and a sense of humor about them, which has been my trademark since 1989.

AJS: What is it like to be a small business owner in the creative mecca of Providence? It seems like one may be easily lost in the noise. Is there a strong network of female-owned small businesses in RI?

AZ: I love being in RI. The networking and support from other women-owned businesses is so wonderful. I belong to The Lady Project Providence, which has helped to promote my business and find more employees and other resources to grow Mode Merr. We are carried in several local shops, including Studio Hop on Hope St and Suite Tart Salon on Broadway. I love working with independent boutiques and making custom pieces for their shops.

AJS: Do you see a large uptick in business around the holidays? What is your most popular item this time of year?

AZ: We do! Everyone loves our Perfect Skirts in Red and Ruby Brocade for the holidays. Our Proper Circle Skirts have been a big hit as well.

AJS: You are an inspiration for any young alternative girl with an interest in fashion design or manufacture. What advice would you give them?

AZ: I have two great interns from The Met School right now. My advice to them is to take the business side of things as seriously as the design process. If you don't have a good plan, it's harder to sustain a business and this drains your creativity. I also tell them to stick to their guns when it comes to what's important to them. For me, it was to offer curvier measurements than a standard size chart. For years I had pattern makers and manufacturers tell me that I had to conform. I knew in my heart that my choice was best for Mode Merr and I have a loyal following that is grateful for that.

AJS: What would you consider the highlight of your career thus far?

AZ: I have had so many amazing adventures and opportunities while building Mode Merr, but I think that the highlight is the company's longevity. I started Mode Merr in 1989 while I was in high school and made it my full-time career in 2000. Being able to make a living at what you truly love doing is the best feeling in the world.

AJS: What does the future hold for Mode Merr Clothing?

AZ: We are launching a new website (modemerr.com) in January that will offer an extended plus-size collection, limited-edition items, a custom-design section and bridal designs in addition to the existing collection.

AJS: Is there anything else you want readers to know about?

AZ: The Mode Merr studio will have a Pre-Viva Open Studio March 6 thru 8 from 12 - 7pm at 560 Mineral Spring Ave Unit HA-100, Pawtucket. This event is on Facebook at facebook.com/modemerrclothing.

Angela can be reached at inquiries@modemerr.com. Follow on Twitter (www.twitter.com/modemerr) and Instagram (www.instagram.com/modemerr).