

Vestige of Baltimore garment district alive in Annapolis

By ELISHA SAUERS, Staff Writer
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Dashew Supply Co., an embroidery threads and tools purveyor, with its five-person staff and four-room warehouse off of General's Highway, is a living relic of the once-booming garment industry in Baltimore.



Dashew Supply Co.'s Jory Bender, right, is the fourth-generation president of the family-run embroidery sewing supplier, which turns 112 years old this year. She stood with her father, Melvin Bender, and sister, Lisa Bender, in the Annapolis warehouse earlier this month against the backdrop of a photograph of Jacob Dashew, Jory and Lisa's great-grandfather, who began the business in 1898 in Baltimore's renowned garment district, originally as a sewing machine parts and repair company.

The family-owned company, in its fourth generation, has outlived most of its contemporary competitors and has made many sacrifices to survive major market changes throughout the century.

Founded in 1898 by a young immigrant, Jacob Dashew, under the name J. Dashew Inc., the company began as a sewing-machine parts and repair business.

In the early 20th century, Dashew invented and patented a few unsuspecting machines that revolutionized the industry - an electric automatic buttonhole stitcher that kept the workers' fingers at a safe distance from the vacillating needles and a tea bag maker for McCormick Spice Co. that sewed tea leaves into a filter pouch for easy steeping.

Dashew may not have the name recognition of some other prominent companies in the Baltimore garment district, such as Jos. A. Banks, Strouse Brothers or Henry Sonneborn

Co., but it played just as vital of a role in the local men's clothing industry. In fact, Dashew even provided supplies for some of those brands.

Blown-up sepia photographs and design diagrams from the glory days of Baltimore's industry are displayed proudly throughout Dashew Supply's headquarters in Annapolis, along with antiques, such as an industrial clothes iron the weight and feel of an Olympic curling stone.

A framed newspaper article from 1904 about the great fire in Baltimore - a blaze that spanned 24 blocks and destroyed a number of garment district buildings including Dashew's - is hung in a prominent spot in the lobby.

Jory Bender, Dashew's great granddaughter and the current president of Dashew Supply, never knew the company's founder but has imbued a sense of pride in his accomplishments, she said, even though the company has changed significantly over the past 112 years.

As the fourth president of the family-run business, Bender, who had studied and practiced therapeutic recreation in her first career, didn't initially have an interest in taking the reins on a sewing company.

"I didn't think I was ever going to be in the business," she said after taking a huge breath. But "There's not a chance it would have kept on going. It would have dissolved. I wanted that history to continue. It would just be too hard to see it go."

Dashew could have completely bottomed out, she said. In the 1990s, sewing suppliers and garment manufacturers began outsourcing production overseas, taking its toll on the local business. Sales plunged to \$3 million in 2000 from a \$17 million range in the 1980s.

At the time, Melvin Bender, Jory's father and Dashew's grandson-in-law, had struggled with whether to shut down operations altogether. Melvin, who continues to work under his daughter's leadership, reflected on the difficult decision.

"I wasn't so much disillusioned with the industry as I had just accepted it for what it was," he said. "The main portion of production had gone to the Dominican Republic and places like that because it was cheap labor, and how could you compete with that?"

The literal geographic market shift gave Jory the bold idea to focus the business solely on embroidery, as the niche seemed to be growing in popularity. When she took over the business in 2001, she had to lay-off some employees and make other reductions to stay afloat.

But business is bouncing back. Old customers and vendors have continued strong business ties with Dashew Supply, such as Eastman Machine Co. of about 80 years, and Jory said the active client roster totals about 3,000 today.

That list includes varied names such as Under Armour, an athletic apparel company that made \$856.4 million in total revenue last year, and Hoffman Embroidery, a one-man home business in Annapolis.

Dashew has already beaten the odds for multi-generational, family-owned companies. According to *Family Business Review*, more than 30 percent of all family-owned businesses survive into the second generation, while only 12 percent will continue into a third generation.

The likelihood of a business remaining through a fourth generation or more in a family dives to just 3 percent, according to the report.

Whether Dashew will live to see a fifth generation, that remains to be seen, said Jory, a mother of four children.

"I don't know if they'll have that interest, but I guess time will tell," she said.