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Where vintage garments get renewed life



For as long as he can remember, Duane Schumann has been fascinated by vintage clothing. His grandmother was an antique clothes guru and his uncles sparked an early interest in historical military clothing. He took his first job in drycleaning at age 19, but his career detoured in the mid-1990s when he went to work for a contaminated soil removal company. Wanting to do cleaner work, he returned to the drycleaning industry and today manages the Treasured Garment Restoration division at St. Croix Cleaners, an Award of Excellence cleaner in Stillwater, MN, where he hand-cleans vintage garments to the tune of 50 or 60 a week at the rate of \$75 an hour. He has worked on textiles for the Minnesota Historical Society, costumes for the Guthrie Theater and the ink-stained paints of pop star Prince. Currently he is looking forward to tackling the restoration of a gown from 1802. Schumann is featured in this month's profile on page 6.

Few takers for small business loans

Unlike the popular cash for clunkers government give-away, there have been relatively few takers for the government's loan program designed to help struggling small businesses. The program itself has been a clunker so far.

Known as America's Recovery Capital (ARC), the program lets business owners apply to a bank for an interest-free loan, the proceeds of which can be used to retire existing debt. The loans in essence help current cash flow by postponing debt payments.

The program is scheduled to last through September, 2010, or until the money runs

out. Off to a slow start, it looks like time will run out before the money.

With \$255 million allocated, the Small Business Administration figured it could fund about 10,000 loans of up to \$35,000 each. As of mid-August, the agency reported that only 1,127 loans, totaling \$36.8 million, had been extended.

SBA pays the bank two percentage points over the prime rate. After a one-year deferral, the borrower repays the loan over five years. The agency will repay the lender in case of default.

Many banks, including some of the largest, appear reluctant to take part in the

program, *The New York Times* reported on Aug 13. Some bankers cited the lack of a profit motive in a small loan extended over six years. Also, banks can't charge an application fee for ARC loans, which could cover some of the lenders' costs. Other bankers said the underwriting standards require as much work as larger loans. Also, banks can't charge an application fee for ARC loans, which would have covered at least some of the lenders' costs.

Another sticking point is that Congress restricted loan eligibility to companies that are struggling but viable. The business must face an "immediate financial hardship,"

meaning a 20 percent reduction in a critical operating number, such as revenue, or other hardship such as declining sales, frozen credit lines, difficulty meeting payroll, paying rent, or difficulty making loan payments.

But the company also has to have shown a profit, or at least a positive cash flow, in one of the last two years and it must do a two-year cash-flow projection to show it can repay all its obligations. Also, a borrower should be no more than 60 days past due on any loan being paid with an ARC loan.

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Cleaner tries to bring home the groceries for a local food bank

It was a new idea and may not have caught on like Robert Meaney hopes, but he plans to keep trying.

Always favorable to doing things that could help his community, Meaney this summer began inviting local residents to drop off non-perishable food items along with their drycleaning when they visit his drycleaning plant, The Cleaner Spot in Hanover, MA.

In return, Meaney, in addition to taking the donated item to the local food pantry, would keep track of customer's incoming orders and donate \$5 to the food pantry for every \$50 spent on drycleaning.

"Summertime is crucial for our food banks. Kids are home from school, active and hungry," Meaney said. "We often forget this fact because we are so busy."

As summer was winding down, Meaney said the program had gone "slower than I would like" even though his overall business was up from a year ago.

"People are probably not thinking about bringing in food when they go the drycleaner," Meaney reasoned. Hoping that the idea will catch on, he said he plans to extend the offer until fall, then ramp up and try again next summer.



Grocery bag in one hand, drycleaning bag in the other, Bob Meaney launched an effort this summer to support the local food bank in Hanover, MA, by inviting customers to donate food items when they bring in the drycleaning.

Vintage Virtuoso

On any given day, those who walk into Treasured Garment Restoration in Stillwater, MN, will likely find Duane Schumann closely watching the clock, although it's not because he's bored with his job as the facility's restoration manager of damaged and vintage clothing.

When handling items that are historical, beloved, expensive, or oftentimes, all three, it is paramount to practice precision and avoid overexposing such priceless and fragile garments to cleaning chemicals.

"Say, for instance, a 160-year-old christening gown comes into the shop," he noted. "I talk to the customer and I let them know that I need to take a step-by-step test to ensure that the piece can be cleaned safely. Those steps will determine what approach I can take and, in turn, that will determine the price."

Duane will be the first to admit that his services can fall a bit on the costly side, but his customers only bring in items they consider to be irreplaceable.

"If it takes me longer to process a piece, then obviously it's going to cost more," Duane noted. "Anything that's vintage does not get processed inside a machine. It's all done by hand cleaning and the procedure that I take costs \$75 an hour to process a vintage piece. Usually what I do is start off at about \$75. Then, after the first hour, it gets broken down into 15-minute increments, which means \$18.75 will be added to that \$75 every 15 minutes. So, I pretty much keep watching the clock to make sure I'm fair to the customer."

On many occasions, Duane's customers are often blown away by the results of his restoration process, which gives him a gratified feeling.

"There have been some times that I really surprised people... things that nobody ever thought could be turned around," he said. "I've also had a few come in that I hate to be the doctor to tell you that you got cancer, but there's really nothing that can be done with this safely. It is what it is."

"No matter what step you take to try to make it go forward, it's going to end up five steps backwards and you'll have nothing left but mush. You have to know your limitations and draw the line"

Fortunately, Duane does not have to draw the line very often. He really hates to turn anything away, thus there is never a shortage of items to be worked on.

"What comes behind my wall are things that can take anywhere between two weeks to a month to process," he explained. "I have a shop full of wedding gowns. I'm the specialist who does that. I get anything that has to do with vintage era... christening gowns, antique quilts and needlepoints, antique shoes, lamp shades, rugs, draperies, stuffed animals. The list goes on and on."

No matter what item passes through the door, Duane's approach remains the same... such as the time the Minnesota Historical Society sent in an expensive suit that had belonged to pop superstar Prince.

"There was a pen mark on the pants

and they wanted me to try to get it out without damaging the material," he recalled. "This was a sharkskin suit so it was really super delicate material. I was able to pull it off by getting the ink out of it."

Duane never dwelled on the fact that the suit had belonged to Prince. He treats every garment equally, which is one reason why he's so successful.

"What you have to do with something like that is you have to keep in mind that this is a customer just like any other customer. Yes, it's Prince, but he is your customer," he said. "Just fol-



Duane Schumann

low through with the process and don't worry about if it's Obama's suit or whatever. Once you start doing that, you're going to give yourself limitations and you're not going to be actually performing the job you can do. That's why I believe and trust in myself 100 percent."

For as long as he can remember, Duane has always been fascinated by vintage clothing, something his grandmother often collected.

"She used to be kind of an antique clothes guru where she liked to wear older fashion stuff," he recalled. "I just kind of drew on that."

His uncles also cultivated an avid interest in historical military clothing, especially uniforms from World War II and the Korean War.

"A lot of my desire was into the military stuff, but then it just kind of went off into different fabrics, the stitching, how things are put together, just really analyzing the way things were done back in the day when the industrial revolution wasn't there and everything had to be made by hand," he said. "It takes a creative mind to create that piece of lace or silk embroidered together. It was an art in itself."

Duane fostered a creative mind himself. He often toiled away on highly detailed drawings, even at a young age, and he loved the fact that he lived across the street from one of John Kosmoski's world-renowned House of Kolor custom paint shops.

"I was always intrigued by the things they did because in his shop they would paint cars and motorcycles in there," he said. "Being a young kid, I'd go over there and watch how they did it and how they would operate the spray gun, then take them apart and clean them."

Not too surprisingly, restoring and painting custom cars and motorcycles is a hobby that he still enjoys today.

Duane was 19 when he first started working in the cleaning industry at Don's Leather Cleaning. Later, he enjoyed custom painting small airplanes for Mitchell Painting for a stint before he opted to join with Clean N' Press.

In the mid-1990s, he changed gears once again and worked in the dirt remediation field for a company called Clean Soils.

tion with a consistence of odorless mineral spirits and some soaps and sizing that go into that," he said. "I created a machine that helps me do that. It's basically a tank that has an aeration system hooked up to it that I can adjust the air level while I'm moving the piece around on a screen by my hand. So, the air keeps circulating where it will flush the impurities out of the fabric and not agitate it too much to tear it."

Before Duane can work on such precious and delicate items, however, he has to work hard to

"Basically, they would dig up contaminated soil from anywhere where there had been a gas station and somebody wanted that property for something else," he explained. "So, all of that soil would have to be pulled out. We would recycle it... put it into a machine that would burn out all the contaminants and then reprocess it."

The job taught Duane a lot of science and chemistry, knowledge he would later apply to restoring garments. After six years, he burned out.

"I was always praying every day, 'Oh Lord, please get me out of this dirty job. Get me into something that would be a little cleaner,'" he laughed.

He returned to the cleaning industry in 1996 with Best Cleaning and Restoration and remained there for about a decade.

Almost two years ago, Duane met with Dave and Polly Nemeč at St. Croix Cleaners in Stillwater, the first plant to earn the DLI Award of Excellence in Minnesota.

The Nemečs wanted to open up a Treasured Garment Restoration branch and they asked Duane to head up the division.

Due to the nature of vintage restoration, he probably only turns out about 50 or 60 garments a week. Fortunately, there's no rush factor involved.

"There are six steps that I always follow through with," he noted. "Test. Patience. Test. Patience. Test. Patience. If you follow all six of those, you're going to be OK."

Throughout his career, the longest Duane has ever spent restoring an item was two months. It happened to be on the oldest garment he has ever restored: a wedding gown from 1832.

"On something like that, what I usually do is use a mild drycleaning solu-

gain the trust of his customers.

"First of all, I always get involved with the customer and find out what their feelings are, get the story behind what the piece is," he said. "I have to give them that comfort in order for them to want to leave the item. I care about what they're telling me. I ensure them that the item will be staying with me in a safe spot until it is complete and ready to be preserved or restored for wearing. Until that point, they are leaving it with the person that it needs to be with."

Duane's clients include the Naegele family who own the Minnesota Wild hockey franchise. Sometimes Jennifer Naegele brings in some interesting pieces that simply defy description.

"She goes to England and all over the world to museums and buys things that you would not believe," he said. "I've done some bedspreads for her that were silver and gold embroidered that were priceless, basically. If you'd put a number on it for a cleaners, you'd go belly up."

For Duane, however, that's just a typical day at the office. He simply never knows what will come in next.

In fact, he was quite excited about a phone call he received recently about a potential new project.

"They found a chest that had two dresses in it," he said. "One was from 1802 and it was documented. And, there's also one from the 1900s. She wants to have them restored."

Though she hasn't brought them in yet, Duane can't help but anticipate the prospect of a new challenge.

"I really want to see that piece," he said. "I don't know anybody who would be as excited about that as me. It's 207 years old! That's something that really needs some attention and care to it."