Frequently Asked Questions

*Thank you for your interest in my work! Following are questions asked of me over the years from reporters to school students. If after reading through these FAQ’s you still have questions about me or my work please feel free to write me at Nancy@RecycleRunway.com.*

**What is your mission?**

I create couture sculptures fashioned from trash and tailored to raise awareness about pressing environmental issues.

**How did you get started designing fashions from recyclables?**
I made my first recycled fashion in 1998-- while working as the recycling coordinator for the City of Santa Fe, I realized that art and fashion could be used to raise the consciousness of the public about recycling in a fun and positive way. I co-founded an event called the Recycle Santa Fe Art Market that is still going strong! The opening night always features a recycled fashion contest and I would make a dress every year to promote the contest. Soon I had a wonderful collection of recycled garments, and I started to get invited by other recycling coordinators around the country to give recycled fashion shows in their communities.

In 2008 I stopped doing fashion shows because I realized that I could reach more people with my message of sustainability with exhibitions. I also wanted an audience that was not already environmentally minded. Plus the fashion shows created a lot of wear and tear on tear on the garments. Now I install exhibits of my garments in airports, museums and shopping malls around the US.

New Mexico Museum of Art, August 2012

Albuquerque International Airport, 2011-2012

Pittsburgh International Airport, 2010

Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, 2009

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, 2008

The focus of everything I do is environmental education, in addition to the exhibitions I also give workshops and speeches. I encourage people to change at least one thing in their lives to benefit the environment. Please visit my website at [www.RecycleRunway.com](http://www.RecycleRunway.com) for photos and further descriptions of my environmental initiatives.

**Where can we see your work?**

I have a traveling exhibition of 18 of my sculptures called ReDress Upcycled Style that is traveling to museums around the US. You can see the exhibition schedule on this webpage:

**Sometimes you call your work garment and sometimes sculptures, why?**

When the work used to be work in fashion shows I called them garments, however now that I make the pieces for display I call them sculptures as this essentially what they are since they are not worn anymore. Note, I still enjoy the challenge of making them wearable so all the garment still have zippers and buttons and for the most part could be worn.

**Where do you get your ideas for the different fashion articles?**

My design sensibility is influenced by fashions from 1900-1950. I get most of my ideas from watching old movies and pouring over fashion books from that period. Sometimes I am commissioned to make a garment from a specific material (see the coke, Toyota and Target garments) so I begin to think about the properties of the materials and how I might be able to transform them into something beautiful-- at the same time I am looking in my vintage fashion books and the two sources of information seem to come together in a daydream-- and a dress is born!

**What inspired you to start using recycled materials to create fashion garments?**My choice to use waste materials to create couture garments is multi-faceted.From an artistic stand point, the challenge of transforming trash into elegant fashions is very exciting. I love watching people discover that what they thought was a glamorous dress, is made from garbage, and “recycling” classic clothing designs from the 1900s-1950s works to enhance that juxtaposition.

On a personal level, working with garbage has been an often unconscious way of working through emotional challenges.

1. **How long have you been upcycling? What was the first piece you upcycled?**

I started upcycling around age 6 using fabric and ribbon remnants to make little dresses, skirts and shirts to for my two inch tall teddy bear!

In my sophomore year of college I started my first official upcycling business venture creating origami jewelry out of used wrapping paper and selling them at Portland’s Saturday Market under the Burnside bridge. Origami peacock earrings were my “signature” product, I must of folded hundreds of these little 1 inch square pieces of paper. Fast-forward 10 years later, and I’m the Recycling Coordinator for the City of Santa Fe co-founding a recycled art market and trash fashion show. I wanted to create a recycled dress to promote the event and remember those fans, but this time I used old junk mail to make a flamenco style dress with cascades of “ruffles” made from the fans. My original peacock earrings that I made as a teenager are now part of that sculpture, the Junk Mail Fan Dress, which is touring museums around the US in my exhibition called ReDress: Upcycled Style.

1. **What inspires you to upcycle?**

There are several reasons that I like working with waste materials. First, there is something very therapeutic for me in the process of taking trash (something we think of as stinky and gross, and that we want to move out of our space) and transforming it into a beautiful and elegant object that attracts people’s attention. Honestly, I find no inspiration in new materials, but give me a pile of garbage and the energy and ideas begin to flow! Additionally, as an educator and environmental advocate waste materials are a valuable tool for engaging the public and initiating conversations about our individual impacts on the earth and ultimately, I hope, changing behaviors. And Lastly, I try to reduce my personal carbon foot print in every aspect of my life. Using waste materials not only replaces the new materials that I might otherwise use, but it also honors the resources used and pollution produced in all stages of that items life. Upcycling keeps materials alive instead of burying, laying them to rest, forever in landfills.

1. **What materials do you use?**

An easier question to answer is what materials would I not use-- I have and am willing to work with almost anything, EXCEPT hazardous or radioactive materials.

1. **What is your view of the upcycling industry and how it's evolving?**

The practice of upcycling is very old though the term is quite new, its first recorded use was just in 1994. I think it is a useful term to bring awareness to the fact that all recycling is not equally beneficial. For example down cycling often happens with plastics when many different types are mixed, causing structural weakness in the final product.

Today’s upcycled movement has come to be associated with makers, who are not using huge quantities of materials as say a plastic lumber manufacture does, but rather breathing new life into waste materials often one materials at a time. This upcycling pays homage to and makes precious the items we so easily dismiss by thoughtlessly throwing things away.

That being said, there are upcyclers such as LoopWorks in Portland, OR that are definitely upcycling on a mass-production scale. They are transforming hundreds of thousands of discarded Southwest Airlines leather seat covers into wonderful bags. So the upcycling industry can happen on both scales, and that is exciting!

1. **Any words of advice for eco-prenuers?**

Sustainability is an all encompassing concept, it refers to not only the environment but also social structures and finances. I have been learning over the last 15 years, that in order to be truly sustainable I have to take care of myself as well as my business to be successful. So I try to take time to do things that relax and refresh my soul. I believe that all entrepreneurs, no matter what product or service they sell, are creative people. Use your creativity to market yourself and structure your business in creative ways!

Being an eco-prenuer also means learning how to be a business woman and financially sustain myself and my work. I highly suggest that ANYONE who is selling anything, no matter how big or small your venture is, seek business assistance. The US Small Business Administration has offices all over the country as do organizations like SCORE. Seek them out and use their services! I have been working with a non-profit organization called WESST for eight years and I can say with certainty that I would not be where I am today without their assistance!

1. **Provide a supporting statement of what you think of** [**UpcyclePost**](http://www.UpcyclePost.com)**.**

I love the vision behind UpcyclePost-- it’s like if Etsy, the Zero Waste Alliance, Pintrist and Freecycle all had a baby together, this would be their offspring! I like how they are building a model that includes the three P’s: Planet, People and Profits… definitely a sustainable venture!

**How do you pick the perfect materials to use?**

I choose materials based upon the project. If the piece is sponsored by an organization then I use their materials, which they will often send to me. The Environmental Steward-ess is a recent example of this process. In other cases, I start with a waste product that I want to use and then design a garment that I think is well suited to the properties of that material. The Faux Fur Coat is a good example of that.

**Where do you find the recycled materials you use?**

Sometimes my sponsors provide the materials as was the case with Target, Delta Air Lines and Toyota. Other times I raid my neighbors recycling bins or go dumpster diving for special materials! People are always trying to give me their trash, but I only accept materials for projects that I am working on as my studio space is limited!

**What do you think is the most unusual material you have recycled into fashion?**
CAR PARTS! Toyota commissioned me to dig through their recycling containers (note: they recycle between 80%-95% of their garbage, so there is not much in their trash cans to choose from!). This garment proved to ME that I could make anything elegant… even car parts!

**What do you think is the most creative item you have made?**

I think my overall concept for environmental education is what is most creative, more so then any one of my individual garments.

I love the challenge of making garbage beautiful, glamorous and elegant. By publically displaying my recycled garments, I invite people to redefine their definition of waste, garbage and trash. I strive to transform the concept of “waste” into “resource” and encourage individual responsibility for the environment in a fun, playful and positive context.

**Are any of your designs mass produced and sold to the public?**

No, I enjoy creating one-of-a-kind pieces, there are lots of very talented people in the fashion industry that are designing and mass producing sustainable fashions. That is not my interest or talent. The heart of my work is about education, not clothing people.

**Can anyone buy your products?**

Yes, however because they are so time intensive to create they are quite expensive, so it is usually institutions that commission work from me.

**How do you transport your work to the exhibits?**

My ReDress: UpCycled Style traveling exhibition is shipped on dress forms in very large crates by professional art shippers. Other work I box myself, often using furniture boxes, and send FedEx.

**Are your products durable?**

They are not durable for wearing on a regular basis. Some can be occationally worn for special occasions, and others really can only be displayed in exhibitions.

**Are they difficult to clean? How do you clean them? Does it's maintenance use many recourses?**

Because they are not worn regularly, they do not require cleaning as normal clothing does.

**What can be done to your products when they are discarded? Could you re-use them?**

I maintain the garments so that they can continue to be exhibited.

**You have had a number of commissions from Coke, Target, etc., what do they do with the article you create for them?**

I keep the garments, they stay in the Recycle Runway Collection are displayed in airports and museums nationwide and continue to “work”—capturing peoples attention so that I can talk about environmental topics. So the companies get to be associated with the environment, art, fashion and youth in front of tens of millions of people through the airport exhibits, the youth presentations and the associated press.

**What do you hope to accomplish with your fashion exhibits, etc.?**
I want to change the way the people think about their relationship to the environment. I want them to realize that it is the culmination of each of our individual moment-to-moment decisions that has caused the polluted air, the polluted water and the polluted land as well as the global warming and species extinction that we hear about everyday. Likewise it is our moment-to-moment decisions at home, at work, at school, at church and in all our social activities that can mitigate the damage we have created.

Change starts with small steps, many people already recycle and I want to build on this. What else can you do, would you compost? Would you be willing to drive less and walk, bus, or carpool more? And most importantly will you bring this environmental ethic to work with you? The majority of damage done to the environment happens through industry and the laws that govern them… all of which is created, implemented and managed by individuals that can make different choices.

**What is your advice to young people?**

I have a very strong belief that if we pay attention to what is interesting, to what makes us curious, to what is fun and to what we love to do then we find ourselves in some amazing places. This has been my experience and it has led into this incredible career. I share this message with the thousands of kids that I talk to but I think it is applicable to anyone!

I feel so fortunate to have this unusual, fun, meaningful and very fulfilling career!

**When did you know that you were an artist and that yours would be a creative life?**

The first summer after I graduated from high school I had a job pulling dead frogs off of a conveyer belt at a strawberry factory and realized I needed to explore a different direction!

The second summer I created a little business for myself making origami earrings and selling them at Portland’s Saturday Market. I loved this experience and while happily folding scraps of wrapping paper into jewelry in my parent’s basement, I had two prophetic realizations:

1. One was that I wanted to have a unique career that reflected my individually and creativity.
2. My second predictive thought was that my legacy in life-- my mark on the world, would be through art.

Of course I could not imagine at that time what my life would look like now and the very unique path it did indeed take… but I was right:  it is a wonderfully creative life!

**What do you like best about your professional life?**

I get to use creativity in all aspects of my career, not just in making the work itself, but also structuring my business, marketing myself and…. unfortunately my bookkeeping too!

**What do you consider your greatest professional accomplishment?**

I am honored to have one of my pieces, the Obamanos Coat, in the Smithsonian Institution’s permanent collection.

**What is one of the things you hope to do before the end of your life---in other words, something from your Bucket List.**

In the next 10 years I hope to travel around the world giving exhibitions, workshops and presentations. I want to experience as many cultures as I can, using art and environmental activism as a means of connection!

**What one piece of advice would you give to young professionals in your field?**

If you want to make a living as an artist you must also call yourself an entrepreneur. WESST in New Mexico is a great resource; I have received countless hours of (sliding scale) training and individual consultations from them. They have played a key role in my present day success. WESST is funded by the US Small Business Administration so you can find similar services anywhere—use them!

Also, use your creativity not just to make art, but to market yourself and structure your business in creative ways. Your creativity is a powerful asset in building a profession as an artist!

**In your opinion, are you a fashion designer, an artist or an ecological activist?**

I consider myself and artist and ecological activist. I have no training as a fashion designer, nor do I create fashion to be worn. I consider my work sculptures, not fashion.

**Do you think that clothing could be too aesthetic to make people think more about our waste of material? Is fashion itself is too much the centre of attention?**

Over the years I have found fashion to be a surprising effective way of engaging people in looking at the very serious issues our society faces around waste, pollution and climate change. My experience is that when I approach public education about these issues directly, I lose people’s interest and desire to engage pretty quickly. But when I come in from a different angle, when I engage a different part of their brain first, then I can bring these issues up in a non-threatening context and have deeper and longer conversations.

**How do you get your message across?**
In addition to the public installations of my sculptures, I give workshops and presentations to audiences of all ages across the US. I have given twge across? gtated!d! dress was determined by the nles and then when they were sew to the dress they e new sculptuo TEDx talks and many presentations to audiences ranging from museum docents, to university design students, to curious 5th graders. I particularly love to create new sculptures in public workshops. My sculpture Eco-Flamenco is an example of one such project. I created it with 5,000 people over a 3 week period in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2011. It is made from parachute scraps and cereal boxes painted with recycled paint and cut into little circles. People wrote eco-pledges—commitments of actions to help the environment on the circles. When they were sown to the dress the circles transformed into cascades of ruffles, and the length of the dress was determined by the number of people that participated.

**What do you do with all the clothes you don’t want to wear anymore? Have you ever thought about reusing them?**

I wear and repair my clothes until they are falling apart and then I use them as rags.

**What do you do to save our planet at home?**

I am a bit obsessed with living lighter on the earth, here are the things that I do in my life AND things I could still do to decrease my carbon footprint:

Current activities:

* I recycle and compost all the waste that I can, even saving some to bring to other communities that recycle things that are not accepted where I live.
* I seldom shop, unless I need really something and when I can, I buy used items. Large appliances I tend to purchase new as they are significantly more energy efficient. And I try to buy high quality items that will last, though they are sometimes difficult to find.
* I buy as much of my produce as possible from local farmers at our farmers market..
* I buy local, recycled, organic, fair trade, non GMO, minimal packaged food and products whenever possible.
* When giving gifts I either give donations, items I make, useful items, or locally made things.
* I’m learning how to grow my own food.
* I have a low water garden with a pretty efficient drip system. I live in the high desert to water is a BIG issue for us.
* I work at home so don’t commute.
* My partner and I share a car, but I do have a work truck that I try to drive as little as possible.
* I ride my bike for about 80% of my solo trips (it took me a long time to incorporate biking into my life, as hopping in the car is so easy... but since we car share now and the truck is such a guzzler I have an incentive to bike!)

Other things I don’t do yet, but would like to incorporate in my life:

* Create a tool lending library within my community for items that are only used occasionally.
* I fly quite a bit for work and would like to find a way to work via real-time video to cut down the carbon footprint of traveling so much.
* I want to learn how to have chickens and bees!
* Bike and take the bus even more!

**What are you working on now?**In 2011-2012 I had an exhibition of 21 of my sculptures in the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport for 14 months. The ATL Airport has invited me back for a second show in 2016 because the first one was “one of our most popular exhibits”!

I’m so very honored that they have asked me to return– it is a great validation of the work that I have been doing for the last 15 years! I’m also excited because they want me to create a new body of work for the exhibit made with the airport community including airlines, concessionaires and contractors. Many of the sculptures will be made in interactive educational workshops with airport employees, passengers and other ATL community partners including school children. The educational opportunities and reach of this project are really thrilling to me!

Click here to learn more about my background.