

## 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](mailto: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 installing exhibitions in high-traffic public locations. I also wanted an audience that was not already environmentally minded. Plus the fashion shows created a lot of wear and tear on the garments. Now I install exhibits of my garments in airports, museums and shopping malls around the US.

Reading Public Museum in Reading, PA, 2013  
Bascom Visual Arts Center in Highlands, NC, 2013  
Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts in Melbourne, FL , 2013  
New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe, NM, 2012  
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, 2011-2012  
Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, 2010  
Pittsburgh International Airport, 2009  
Albuquerque 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.

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

When the work used to be 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 garments 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 sculptures sponsored by [Delta Air Lines](#), [Coke](#), [Toyota](#) and [Target](#)) 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.

### **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.

### **Do you draw the original design first and then collect material or do you just start and it all comes together?**

Here is how my design process usually works:

First I choose, or a sponsor requests, a waste material for me to work with. Next I will start looking at photos of designs from my favorite periods in fashion (1900-1950) or at photos of garments from magazines that I have cut out over the years. Then (often quite quickly) the complete design of a garment usually appears in my mind. I create the piece from that image in my head. I am not so great at drawing, so if others (like a sponsor) need to see it, then I will draw a pretty crude drawing and pay someone else to create a professional sketch from my chicken scratch that I can share with others.

I never start working on a piece without an image in my head of what it will look like, however the piece does often transform a bit in reaction to the reality of how the materials perform once I start working with them. I know plenty of other artists that begin without a plan and let the materials guide them and create really great work. There is no right or wrong way... and maybe sometime I will challenge myself to start without a design in my mind's eye and see what happens!

**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 piece 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 than 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 occasionally 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 and 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 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 when 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 way of making money!

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 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 an artist and ecological advocate. 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 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, with elegant dresses made from trash, then I can bring these issues up in a non-threatening context and have deeper and longer conversations.

**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 so water is a BIG issue for us.
- I work at home so I 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 neighborhood 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 keep 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 2017 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!

## What was your childhood like and what is was your education/career path?

I grew up in Portland, Oregon immersed in the world of art. My mother owned an art gallery until I was seven years old and used to “install” me with paints and an easel in the front window when she did not have a show up – early performance art! She, like you, was a docent at the Portland Art Museum and later became the President of the Pacific Northwest College of Art for 22 years. She enrolled me in art classes at the Portland Art Museum School at a very early age and in dance classes as well. My step-father is a painter and most of their friends are involved in the art world too, thus my life was always full of creativity!



Me in the Portland Art Museum

My first trash fashions were created for my two-inch tall teddy bear from scraps of cloth and ribbon. I still have the bear and it's wearing a Wonder Woman outfit I made, complete with arm cuffs made from bits of metal that fell off my dog's collar. Years later I created another garment inspired by Wonder Woman, “The Environmental Steward-ess”, commissioned by Delta Air Lines.

me!



The Environmental Steward-ess

My Mom taught me to sew when I was about seven, and except for a draping and pattern making class I took about 5 years ago, my only training came from her. I began with patterns and as a teenager started altering clothes to fit me. In middle school I began visiting vintage clothing stores, drooling over the intricate and beautiful designs from the forties and fifties. I would occasionally buy dresses and alter their tiny waists to fit my larger frame. I imagine that my love of clothing from the 1900s-1950s came from my grandmothers. They were both beautiful women and I returned over and over to photos of them in both their formal and casual outfits. All of my garments are inspired by fashion from this time period. I also love to watch classic movies and look at photos from those years.

When I was 8 years old my Mom and Step-father bought some land adjacent to the Cascade Head Preserve on the Oregon Coast, I spent every summer and weekend here while my step-father built a house overlooking the estuary. These lands were my play grounds and I was allowed to roam freely for hours on end. It was here that I developed my appreciation for nature which has led to my career in environmental education. I fell in love with the beauty and magical spirit of the land.



Cascade Head Preserve on the Oregon Coast



Origami peacock earrings

During the summer of my freshman year in college, I had a job working at a strawberry farm pulling dead frogs off of conveyer belts! The next summer I decided to go in a different direction and set-up shop in my parents' basement creating jewelry from paper scraps folded into origami. I would create the origami jewelry during the week and sell it on the weekends at the local art market. My first entrepreneurial venture lasted for a couple of years and I even sold to some contemporary craft jewelry shops too. The peacock earrings displayed with the "Junk Mail Fan Dress" were made during that time, approximately 1988. The inspiration for that dress came from these earrings. I had at that point, folded hundreds of fans to make my trademark peacock earrings and learned what beautiful patterns and textures appeared from turning different papers into the fans.



Junk Mail Fan Dress



For Halloween that year I was a recycling can!

I received a BA from Pitzer College (Claremont, California) in Sociology and Art. In my junior year I decided to take some time off to indulge myself by focusing only on studio art and art history. I spent a summer at the University of Georgia's art program in Cortona, Italy followed by a year at the Laguna Beach Art Institute in Laguna Beach, CA. At this point I figured that I would likely pursue a career in art, but a mundane event changed the

course of my life – the art school installed a soda pop machine. I watched the garbage fill up with aluminum cans and decided something must be done. At the same time I became very active in a citizens group that was working to save a beautiful nearby canyon from development. Thus began my life of environmental activism. After setting up a recycling program at the art school, I became really interested in the process of recycling.

I finished my last semester at Pitzer with two primary projects. One was a senior exhibition called "In the Wake of our Steps" that featured a series of photos of nudes (representing the spirit of Mother Nature) superimposed on scenes of trash heaps and development projects cutting into the earth. One photo depicted my grandfather (fully clothed!), representing industrialization and development, dominating the landscape – an unsuited role as he was actually a very gentle and kind man. That semester I also created an independent study in solid waste and recycling that included an internship with the City of Claremont, and so began my twenty-plus year career in recycling.



Photo from "In the Wake of our Steps"

I moved to Santa Fe, NM (where I currently live) in 1995, and began working as the Recycling Coordinator. I started numerous programs that encouraged waste reduction and brought attention to recycling. One was a weekend long event called the "Recycle Santa Fe Art Market and Trash Fashion Contest" that I co-founded with some local artists. I'm proud to say that this event continues to this day and is one of Santa Fe's celebrated art events which attracts people from around the country every year. It is also one of the largest and longest-running recycled art and fashion events in the country. I remember telling my Mom after the first year, "It's great to be around artists again. I did not realize how much I miss this world!" To promote this event, I created my first recycled fashion.

I continued creating fashions from garbage and developed a collection that included other people's designs from the trash fashion contests. My recycling colleagues around the U.S. invited me to stage recycled fashion shows at recycling and Earth Day events in their communities. I did this part-time for about nine years during which time I changed jobs and became the Executive Director of the New Mexico Recycling Coalition. In 2007, I was ready for something new and decided to pursue recycled fashion as a full-time career and created my business Recycle Runway.

I wanted to change directions slightly though. I felt like the recycled fashion shows had turned into entertainment for environmentalists, and away from my previous goals of raising awareness about waste reduction in the general population. I longed to reach audiences that were not already environmentally minded, but that were MUCH, MUCH larger. It was on a trip to Chicago, after my last fashion show, where I discovered my new direction. I was thinking a lot about who my audience should be and where I would find them, and as I stepped out of the taxi into the airport it hit me, "Airports! This is the perfect place for me!" For the next five years I installed exhibitions in airports in Albuquerque, Pittsburgh, Phoenix and lastly in Atlanta. The Atlanta Airport, the busiest airport in the world, was a particularly special experience for me. I had twenty-one garments on display for fourteen months in international course E. During that time over 15 million people from all over the world saw my work and message of conservation. I still am overwhelmed when I think about what an amazing opportunity this was!



Atlanta International Airport Exhibition May 2011-July 2012

Since Atlanta was the pinnacle of airport experiences, I decided to explore new venues and audiences for my work, and museums/art centers seemed like a logical next step. Now I have an exhibit called ReDress: Upcycled Style that is touring museums across the United States.



ReDress: Upcycled Style at the Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts