

NEWS

40 YEARS IN HIGH POINT

NEW OWNER, SAME PASSION

Custom-sewing business powered by a love for craft, craftsmanship

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An old sofa in Audra Nunn Tyree's living room has a role in keeping a nearly 40-year-old High Point workroom in business.

Tyree remembers standing on that sofa as a small child. Now, in her Charlotte house, she recently had it recovered. The skilled workers who performed the work told her to never get rid of it. They don't make it like that anymore, they told her. It was a message she was ready to hear, because she credits her mother with instilling in her and her siblings an appreciation for the well-made in home goods.

It's that same appreciation that helped motivate Tyree to take over Artistic Quilting from Kent and Lynn Crawford, who have owned and run the custom workroom for 39 years. The Lane Street operation performs custom sewing of window treatments, bedding and other residential and commercial soft goods for interior-design clients.

The work is typically one-off: Designers specify what they want, and Artistic turns designs into products. The company also serves the upholstered furniture and marine industries and offers cut and sew assistance to display and branding specialists.

It relies on a small but dedicated corps of eight experienced sewing



DAVID HILL / TBJ

Former co-owners Kent Crawford and Lynn Crawford, left and center, with new owner Audra Nunn Tyree in the production area of Artistic Quilting in High Point.

craftswomen whose talents, Tyree has found, are becoming increasingly rare.

After a banking career primarily in marketing roles, Tyree says, she saw an opportunity not only for a viable, well-established business, but also a way to keep skilled workers employed. It also can be a way, she believes, to help re-strengthen the talent pipeline in and around High Point, one of the traditional and remaining centers of the Southeast's furniture and home-design industry.

"One of the reasons why this particular workroom was attractive to me was because it was in a place that —

and I'm going to say this — in theory should have a pipeline of people who have this skill set. What I have come to find out (is) that's not quite as evident, or that was not quite as realistic of a thought, as it seems to be playing out."

Tyree said she wasn't surprised that finding experienced seamstresses in Charlotte might be a challenge, but expected a different situation in High Point, with its furnishings history. It hasn't turned out that way. One avenue to grow the talent pool, she said, might be tapping immigrant communities and people who learned sewing out of necessity who might be interest-

ed in turning it into a career.

"For me, the attraction was these are creative people doing creative things, making real products that people that people enjoy on a daily basis."

The sale closed in December. Tyree and the Crawfords declined to disclose terms, but the Crawfords retained the real estate and are leasing the facility to Tyree. They've stayed on to help with the transition but their last official day was March 29.

Kent Crawford, trained in architecture, was doing drafting for a lumber company and gained cost-estimating experience working on custom millwork before working for his father in the cushion business.

The Crawfords ended up taking over a custom sewing business that specialized in quilting — the style was highly popular for upholstery in the 1960s — until a client asked for help making window treatments. Crawford figured out how to do it, and the company grew from that.

Two-thirds of the current sewing staff — the whole company employs about 12, in addition to the Crawfords — have been with them 25 years or more, Kent Crawford said. One reason is a flexible schedule, but it also helps that it's far from an assembly line, he suggested.

"Our seamstresses pretty much start with something given to them cut, and they get to see that it finishes exactly the way it's supposed to," Kent Crawford said. "There's a lot of satisfaction in seeing that finished product being completed, and knowing that they put all their threads and needles and stitches into it."