

Norma's high fashion sweaters make big sales

A successful Canadian sweater designer is making a bid to sell her wares to foreign markets.

When Norma Lepofsky opened her first retail ready-to-wear business in Toronto's posh Yorkville area in 1974, all she had was a bank loan. She felt she was taking "a terrible risk". True, she had taught herself to knit and crochet by "using my imagination", and had no trouble selling her original works of art to friends and acquaintances. She had also operated a small yarn shop in Toronto in the 1960s and had spent about a decade figuring out how to make yarns, ribbons, silks, and rayons yield unique textures of popcorn, feathers, tweeds and even furs in her sweaters.

But she still felt that hiring about 100 homeworkers to do the actual knitting, and then filling the tiny store with about 100 sweaters made of top-quality European yarn, at the then extravagant price of \$200 to \$300 apiece, was quite a gamble. Luckily, it paid off.

"The store was an immediate success," said general manager Ida Dollemont. "It was in the black with a profit of \$25 000, within the year."

In 1979, Ms. Lepofsky started to look at export markets. She strolled into one of the top fashion department stores in New York and asked them to devote a section to Norma knitwear. "They looked at me as if I was from Mars," she recalled. "I realized then that I had to earn a

section."

She rented 186 square metres of management space in downtown Toronto, hired six full-time staff, and began showing her fashions to the major New York buyers.

US sales

Soon she had a showroom on Fifth Avenue and was selling to Saks, Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdales and boutiques throughout New York.

By 1980, US sales were about \$1 million — twice her Canadian sales, even though she had also opened a store in Calgary — and she had hired ten agents to sell her wares throughout North America, Britain, Europe and Japan.

Today, Lucy Arnaz wears Norma fashions. So does Anne Murray. And, recently, two Saudi Arabian princesses nipped into the Toronto shop 15 minutes before closing time and bought four pieces for a total of \$4 500.

The Norma factory today takes up 1 115 square metres, employs 30 full-time staff and uses 300 to 400 pieceworkers to knit 100 new designs annually. And even with prices now at about \$500 apiece (or \$1 400 for a reversible jacket made with Persian lamb), her fashions are still in constant demand.

Now Ms. Lepofsky is ready to expand her foreign markets — in 1981 \$1.4 million of her sales came from outside Canada. Though her British distribution

house sold \$80 000 worth of sweaters last year, the operation needed a boost. Working with Ontario government representatives in England, the Norma distribution house put together a fashion show at Ontario House last September.

The government provided help including a wine and cheese buffet and a guest list that included Canadian celebrities as well as media and store representatives.

Training facilities boosted

The federal Department of Employment and Immigration has approved 118 projects to establish, expand or modernize training facilities.

Some of the projects that will take place under the federal government's skills growth fund program include:

— New Caledonia College in Prince George, British Columbia, will receive \$2.6 million to set up a training institute for computer-assisted drafting and manufacturing;

— Conestoga College campuses in Kitchener and Guelph, Ontario will draw \$692 000 from the fund to start new training programs for national occupations such as tool and die makers, mould-makers, computer programmers and systems analysts; and

— in Prince Edward Island, Holland College will receive \$958 000 to establish new training programs for systems analysts and programmers.

Of the \$42.1 million in approved funding, \$18.7 million will go to Ontario, \$14.3 million to British Columbia, \$2.6 million to New Brunswick, \$2.4 million to Newfoundland, \$2 million to Prince Edward Island, \$1.7 million to Nova Scotia and more than \$450 000 to Manitoba. To date, no project proposals have been received from Quebec, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

The skills growth fund was established by the National Training Act last August to improve the capacity of Canadian training institutions to train workers for national occupations and to meet the training needs of special groups such as the disabled. A total of \$98 million is available for fiscal years 1982-83 and 1983-84.

Thus far, 47 occupations have been designated as national occupations because they are expected to be in high demand during the 1980s. Shortages of trained people in these fields could have a major adverse effect on the economy.



Promoting Norma sweaters in London, England were (from left to right); Naomi Schroder, Barry Morse, Toby Robbins, John Stephen Hill and Libby Morris.