In Kansas City, A Local Non-Profit is Sparking a Renewed Interest in Sewing

With support from Mid-Continent Public Library, a Kansas City non-profit is helping members of the community build financial stability through sewing.

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Kansas City, MO – With support from Mid-Continent Public Library’s (MCPL) Square One Small Business Services, Kansas City entrepreneur Eileen Bobowski is helping members of her community build financial stability by teaching sewing skills.

Bobowski is the executive director of The Sewing Labs, a non-profit organization whose mission is teaching the legacy of sewing for employment, entrepreneurship, and enrichment. She works alongside an operations manager and two part-time grant-funded sewing instructors. The Sewing Labs began offering classes in 2016 and received its 501c3 designation in 2018. Since its launch, the organization has partnered with various Kansas City nonprofits to help people learn sewing skills.

What initially drew Bobowski to MCPL was a need for high-speed internet. As she explained, Bobowski lives in a more rural area of Kansas City where the Wi-Fi can be spotty. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, she would often visit the library to use their internet. She had also previously used the library’s publicly available conference rooms to host meetings. Through these library services, she was eventually introduced to the MCPL’s Square One Small Business Services program and learned that the library offered various resources that could help her build out her organization.

“I don’t have a marketing team, I don’t have a development team,” she said in an interview. “So, I can tap into those resources [at the library] and build my knowledge and gain more knowledge. That’s what’s been so wonderful about my Square One experience.”

MCPL’s Square One Small Business Services program offers a comprehensive suite of online resources that are intended to help entrepreneurs learn basic skills that they need. This includes tools to help them build a cohesive business plan as well as tutorials to create reports and perform analyses. Also available are videos that teach people how to start specific kinds of ventures such as an event planning business, an Etsy shop, or a daycare. The library also provides access to online versions of various business and technology publications. In addition, the library offers mentoring to help guide small business owners.

These services have been crucial for Bobowski in building The Sewing Labs. For example, with support from the library, she has increased the organization’s social media engagement. Through Square One, she learned strategies for setting up a LinkedIn profile and Facebook page. She has also benefitted from mentorship by Square One staff at different points in time. For example, when The Sewing Labs needed to create a video to
showcase some of their work, Bobowski relied on the assistance of library staff as well as their connections with local expertise in video production.

Besides its educational focus, The Sewing Labs has a social services mission. During COVID-19, volunteers with the organization offered their time and skills to make cloth masks from donated fabric. They also put together Ziploc bags containing the materials needed to sew 12 masks – including the fabric, a separate lining, elastic, and nose wires. With these kits, sewing instructors, volunteers, and teachers could safely stitch the masks from home.

Bobowski’s team set up a drive-through service where people could pick up and drop off the kits. They also created an online portal where people who needed masks could request them. Many in the Kansas City community benefitted from these efforts especially since there was shortage of masks in the area in the early days of the pandemic.

This community project helped The Sewing Labs expand its volunteer base significantly. Since it closed its physical office and created a way for volunteers to work remotely, the organization has successfully grown its community by 1,000%, according to Bobowski.

“People would come and pick up those kits ... and then they'd come back in a week, and they'd drop off a kit and they pick up another one or they'd pick up 10 kits and come back two weeks later,” she said. “And then we would turn around and give them to the different entities throughout the community that were requesting masks ... for example hospitals, hospices, police, fire, other nonprofits, [and] daycares.” In total, over 200 volunteers have created more than 75,000 masks that were distributed for free to the Kansas City community.

In April 2020, Bobowski reached out to Singer, the sewing machine company, and asked if they would donate machines to her organization. She requested and received 30 machines from Singer. This was the start of a fruitful partnership between Singer and The Sewing Labs, one that has resulted in the creation of online content for interested stitchers.

According to Bobowski, the two entities connected over shared ideas like repurposing and upcycling / recycling, as well as “sewing wellness” which she described as fundamental to The Sewing Labs mission and values. “Sewing is so good for your health. It reduces anxiety, lowers your blood pressure, lowers your heart rate, puts you into creative flow.”

The partnership between the two entities has continued to grow. More recently, Bobowski worked with Singer on Facebook live events focused on sewing. These events have covered topics such as how to thread a machine and how to repurpose a man’s dress shirt into an apron. The sewing machine maker has also asked Bobowski’s organization for help with making short how-to-videos that they can distribute to the public along with links to other resources created by Sewing Labs.

These videos are helping Singer respond to a renewed interest in sewing that has arisen in the wake of COVID-19. The company has received requests from customers asking for help with specific topics related to using their machines such as how to wind a bobbin on a Singer sewing machine. “[The pandemic] has certainly given a new focus to sewing,” she said. “There are a lot of entrepreneurs that have grown out of the pandemic. They [were] stuck at home with nothing to do and sewing became an option for them to create new products. We’ve got a lot of phone calls from people who have started businesses during the
pandemic such as creating tote bags for sale and needing stitchers to help them.” In fact, the demand is so great that Bobowski is having a challenging time keeping up with all the requests.

Moving forward, Bobowski hopes to continue her relationship with MCPL and she advises budding entrepreneurs to reach out to the library for help with their business needs. She is also interested in getting more people interested in sewing. One way to do that could be through the library. For example, she suggested promoting The Sewing Labs’ projects and initiatives in display cases at the library. The display would provide relevant information to people about a positive community-based initiative that they could potentially participate in.

Bobowski also said that she could do with additional support with using technology. She has tapped the library to help with shooting videos for her organization’s partnership with Singer and she is continuing to look for other helpful resources. She also highlighted the classes that MCPL offers on using Canva for presentations as valuable for small businesses and non-profits. Additionally, she is reaching out to the library for support with fundraising and grant writing to help her secure the funds she needs to grow her organization. For example, she has used some of the library’s databases to find potential contacts for fundraising activities.

“We are a small organization,” she said. “We need to build our capacity [and] we need to find somebody that’s focused on fundraising, development and grant writing so that we can grow and scale, [and] build more relationships with companies like Singer. And I think one of the ways to do that will be through these databases.”