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*Featuring:*

## **CHILD'S PLAY**

How one Bettendorf couple turned a hobby into a hustle

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An entrepreneur's journey to bringing new style to her hometown

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SUMMER 2025

# THE HEART OF HEALTH CARE

## CELEBRATING NURSES AT MISSISSIPPI VALLEY SURGERY CENTER

Think about the last experience you had in a health care setting. From routine visits to planned procedures and beyond, nurses are at the core of the care you receive.

With approximately 4.3 million nurses in the U.S., there are many extraordinary individuals in the field. At Mississippi Valley Surgery Center (MVSC), whether they're prepping a patient for surgery, coordinating with physicians or providing recovery support, nurses are always focused on what matters most – genuinely caring for patients.

To recognize this important work, we're highlighting two MVSC nurses: Liz Kluever and Ally Hamerlinck.

Liz Kluever has always had a heart to help – especially when it comes to children. Growing up, she pictured herself becoming a teacher. However, as Kluever got older, her interests shifted, and a career in health care became her goal.

Kluever followed that passion, becoming a pediatric nurse in

2016. Eventually, she transitioned to working as an operating room nurse, managing a wide range of needs for patients of all ages at MVSC.

"It didn't take long for me to discover the health care field was where I was meant to be," Kluever said. "I loved the fact that I could help people. I still got to work with kids, just in a little different way."

At MVSC, Kluever assists with everything from total joint replacements to procedures that place ear tubes in children. Mentally and physically intensive, the job goes beyond health, science and attention to detail. It also requires a caring, personable touch. For Kluever, it's all about connecting with patients and her team to create the best experience possible.

"To me, it's not just taking care of patients," she said. "It's more about getting to know the person and figuring out their story. I like providing that connection and

support. And when it comes to connecting with our team, to be honest, MVSC is the only place I've worked where I felt like it was my second home. Everyone here kind of has a piece of your heart."

For Ally Hamerlinck, the journey to a career in nursing started in the womb, alongside her twin brother, who was born with hemophilia, a blood disorder. Caused by a deficiency in clotting factors, hemophilia affects about 30,000 people in the U.S. and often requires infusions and treatments.

"With my brother's disorder, he was always in the hospital at the University of Iowa," Hamerlinck said. "Seeing how the nurses treated him and made him feel safe and comforted, and even had fun with him, is what made me want to become a nurse myself."

Her interest in health care grew as she did, as she often thought about the time her family spent in the hospital.

"When I started, I worked in pediatrics," she said. "I even worked on the floor where my brother was treated. It was a real full-circle moment."

Nearly 10 years into her career, including five at MVSC, Hamerlinck has transitioned to pre- and post-op work, often assisting in the operating room as well. And while her specialty has changed, her commitment to patient care has remained a top priority.

"I'm so happy I can provide hope and comfort in my job," she said. "We have an impact on patients, and they have an impact on us. You have to have heart and empathy to do this job right."

**To learn more about the staff at Mississippi Valley Surgery Center, visit [mvhealth.net](http://mvhealth.net).**

When it comes to patient experiences,  
**nurses make the difference.**



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**Laura Heath**, owner of Trash Can Annie.  
*Katelyn Metzger*

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# Trump's ultimate trade goal – China's 1.4 billion consumers



**MARK GRYWACHESKI**

**Economy**

Mark Grywacheski is an expert in financial markets and economic analysis and is an investment adviser with Quad-Cities Investment Group, Davenport.

**P**resident Donald Trump has long argued that foreign countries place tariffs, quotas and restrictions on U.S.-made goods or engage in unfair trade practices that harm our economy. For Trump, his strategy is simple — force nations to renegotiate their trade policies or be willing to place their economies at risk.

Trade disputes are the mutual infliction of economic damage. They are often a battle of attrition, determined by each nation's ability and willingness, to outlast the other. The biggest factor is economic leverage — using the size and strength of your economy to both impose and absorb economic punishment. This punishment usually comes in the form of tariffs. As the world's largest economic powerhouse, America's economy is an imposing presence. For most nations, to engage the U.S. in a trade dispute provides for dire

options. Either capitulate, and negotiate more U.S.-friendly trade agreements, or face the wrath of punishing tariffs that could severely damage your economy.

For perspective, Canada's economy is about 7% the size of America's economy. Mexico's economy is even smaller at about 6%. Neither have the ability to either impose or absorb a lot of punishment in any extended trade dispute with the U.S. Even the 27-member nation European Union, whose collective economies are roughly 50% the size of America's, is starting to show cracks within its unity.

At the heart of Trump's global trade disputes is China. Trump views China as the biggest violator of unfair trade practices. China heavily subsidizes its steel and aluminum industries. This allows Chinese manufacturers to flood the global marketplace with cheap steel and aluminum at prices with which

U.S. manufacturers cannot compete. Trump has also accused China of violating international treaties by intentionally devaluing its currency, the Chinese yuan. By artificially lowering its currency relative to other global currencies, China inherently makes its goods cheaper to buy, which harms America's manufacturing industry.

But the ultimate prize for Trump is his demand for unconditional access to the Chinese marketplace. Besides having the world's second largest economy, China is also the world's second most populous country, behind only India. With a population of 1.4 billion — more than four times greater than America's — China equates to a massive consumer pool for American goods and services.

But unfettered access to China's consumers remains out of reach. In 2024, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, America's

**\$295.4 billion**

**America's trade deficit with China in 2024**

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce



trade deficit with China was \$295.4 billion, our largest deficit with any single nation. For every \$1 in goods China buys from the U.S., we buy \$4 in goods from China.

American companies also complain that to operate in China, they are required to turn over their intellectual property — such as patents and technology — to the Chinese government. Through its practice of forced technology transfers, China’s state-owned corporations then use these assets to compete against those very same U.S. companies. In other cases,

American intellectual property is obtained by outright theft. Combined, China’s theft, espionage and forced technology transfers are estimated to cost U.S. corporations between \$225-600 billion annually, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Yes, Trump has proven he is quick to use the U.S. economy as a sledgehammer to influence the trade and geopolitical policies of other countries. But China could be a daunting task. China’s economy has the size, and potential durability, to

withstand a longer trade dispute than most other countries.

Perhaps the biggest X-factor is that China is a Communist country. Unlike Canada, Mexico, the European Union and other democratic nations whose leaders are subject to political pressures and reelection, in China, there are simply no elections. Its nation, along with its economy, is dictated by the Communist Party. And the party leadership can simply mandate its citizens will continue to endure a brutalizing economy rather than concede to Trump.

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# Why storytelling is communication's secret weapon

ANDREA BELK OLSON

**P**eople don't remember bullet points. They remember *what happened*. The moment. The metaphor. The story about how a customer hacked your product into a completely new use case — and you turned it into a breakthrough. That's the kind of stuff that gets passed around. Because stories don't just deliver information. They create meaning. They connect. They get remembered.

Communication isn't just about getting the message *out*. It's about getting it to *land*. And that's where storytelling earns its keep. It helps people not only understand, but *care*. It moves your ideas from ears to action.

Not with fluff. With structure.

The good news? You don't need to be Hemingway to be effective. There are proven frameworks anyone can use to turn dry content into something people will engage with — and maybe even repeat. Here are five that do the heavy lifting, each with its own angle depending on your audience, goal and context.

## 1. THE PIXAR PITCH

Once upon a time...  
Every day...  
Until one day...  
Because of that...  
Because of that...  
Until finally...

This one comes straight from the pros at Pixar. You know, the folks who made grown adults cry over a lamp and a fish. It works because it follows the universal arc of transformation — something changes, and the character adapts. And *that* is exactly what strategy, product, and business communication should be about.

**Use it when:** You're selling a vision. Whether it's a new initiative or a culture shift, use this format to show the arc: where we were, what changed and how we're winning now.

## 2. AND, BUT, THEREFORE (ABT)

We do X AND Y,  
BUT Z is in our way,  
THEREFORE we're doing this.

Short. Clean. High impact. ABT cuts through the noise by establishing context, identifying the tension and driving toward action. It works because it forces narrative tension — the thing that makes people lean in.

**Use it when:** You're writing an executive summary, a funding pitch or even a strong social post. Any time you want to hook fast, get to the point and frame a compelling case in under 30 seconds.

## 3. STORYBRAND FRAMEWORK

There's a character  
Who has a problem  
And meets a guide  
Who gives them a plan  
And calls them to action  
That leads to success (or avoids failure).

Donald Miller's StoryBrand flips the script. You're not the hero — your *audience* is. Your brand, product or idea? You're the guide. You've got the map, the flashlight and the granola bars.

**Use it when:** You're writing anything external — marketing copy, onboarding flows, campaign strategies. Put your audience at the center, highlight their challenge and show how you help them win.

## 4. WHAT? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

**What:** Here's what's happening.  
**So what:** Here's why it matters.  
**Now what:** Here's what we're going to do.

This one is the gold standard for clarity. It forces relevance and urgency into every message. No spiraling. No academic detours. Just crisp communication.

**Use it when:** You're debriefing after a meeting, writing internal updates or getting a cross-functional team aligned. It's especially useful when dealing with data — this format turns numbers into decisions.

## 5. MINTO'S PYRAMID PRINCIPLE

Start with the answer.  
Support it with grouped arguments.  
Back each with data or examples.

Structured thinking meets strategic storytelling. Minto's Pyramid is the consultant's best friend and with good reason — it respects time, prioritizes logic and builds trust fast.

**Use it when:** You're pitching to the C-suite, making a recommendation or writing a proposal. This isn't a narrative arc — it's a laser beam. Start with your conclusion, then walk through your logic with elegance and precision.

**THIS ISN'T ABOUT BEING "CREATIVE." IT'S ABOUT BEING EFFECTIVE.**

Storytelling isn't about making things sound pretty. It's about making things

*clear, compelling and human.* It's how you make dry data come alive. How you make change feel exciting instead of terrifying. And how you lead without preaching.

So, whether you're leading a transformation, launching a product or just trying to get someone to answer your email, remember facts tell. Stories *sell*. And the best communicators? They're not just analysts or strategists. They're storytellers in disguise.

Now go tell the damn story.



Andrea Belk Olson is the CEO of Pragmadik, a strategic change agency, serving multi-billion-dollar companies. She is a 3x published author, contributor to Harvard Business Review, INC magazine, Entrepreneur Magazine, World Economic Forum, a TEDx Speaker, and a SCORE Subject Matter Expert. She is also an instructor/coach for the University of Iowa's Entrepreneurial programs.

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# One woman's trash, another woman's treasure:

**Trash Can Annie** brings new energy to vintage clothes

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**GRETCHEN TESKE**  
gteske@qctimes.com

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**N**othing ever goes out of style at Trash Can Annie. Eventually, it all comes around and is labeled as vintage.

Tucked into Davenport's Motor Row neighborhood at 311 E. Second Street, the beloved vintage clothing and accessory store is filled with carefully curated pieces that pay homage to the decades gone by. Running the store is Laura Heath, who first got to know the store as a teenage

customer before she took the leap into being a business owner.

Heath grew up on a farm in Cedar Rapids and frequently came to Davenport with her parents. Her father introduced her to Trash Can Annie when she was 14, she said.

Not long after that, she started taking solo trips to the Quad-Cities to frequent her favorite shop.

"I grew up on a farm, so I made the money to buy the things that I wanted," she said. "I was a very responsible kid, just like I am a very responsible adult. And fortunately, I could still wear the clothing that I bought when I was 14 years old."

Trash Can Annie was started in 1978 by Candace Bellomy. The name for the store was inspired by people not keeping their original pieces and instead throwing them away.

"People would wear things from their own families, but to go thrifting was not something people did," she said. "It became sort of trendy in the '60s, and then it progressed from there."

## VINTAGE ROOTS

While Heath's father was the one to introduce her to the beloved vintage store, her passion for vintage clothing, she said, stemmed from admiration for both parents' style.



**Laura Heath** offers styling sessions to clients. She offers personal shopping, wardrobe editing and capsule wardrobe building services.

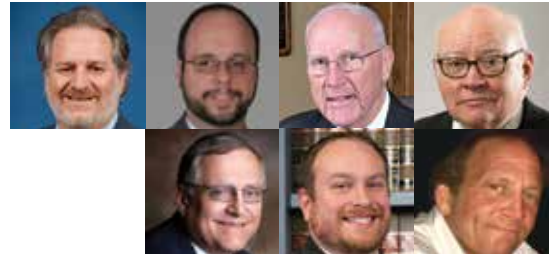
*Katelyn Metzger*



Trash Can Annie is located at  
311 East Second Street in Davenport.

*Katelyn Metzger*

# TOP LAWYERS IL QUAD CITIES AREA BASED UPON A SURVEY OF THEIR PEERS



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## "I think of the clothing that's out there now, and it won't become vintage, because it won't last." - Laura Heath

"As a 14-year-old, when you're looking at your parents' clothing, there's a generation there, and they have a generation of things in their clothing," she said. "I was automatically drawn to it."

As it turns out, being drawn in to the finer things was an inherited trait.

"My mother was a personal shopper, before there were personal shoppers, because my parents dress exceptionally well," she said. "People would see them around town, and a notable person of Cedar Rapids, saw the way my mom was dressed and asked her if she would be interested in being paid to shop for him."

The man worked for Rockwell Collins, an aerospace company, and would hire people from around the world. When employees arrived, he wanted to ensure they had everything they needed for success.

While her mother enjoyed her work, Heath was focused on enjoying her teenage years as an accomplished athlete. Volleyball, track and field and gymnastics took up much of her time, but she saved her weekends for riding her two Arabian horses.

"When my mother asked me to go shopping with her, I told her that I wanted to be riding instead," Heath said.

Her mother would tell Heath she would learn something from going shopping with her.

"And she was right," Heath said. "I did, because I learned how items were made, and I knew what quality was at a very young age."

Quality is what makes vintage pieces unique, she said, and what makes them last.

"It's always going to be there, especially now, because the quality of fabrics that people use now are tragic," she said. "I think of the clothing that's out there now, and it won't become vintage, because it won't last."



(Top) Laura Heath opens several drawers to show off necklaces and brooches at Trash Can Annie on Wednesday, April 16, in Davenport. (Bottom) A look at just a portion of vintage accessories at Trash Can Annie located on Second Street in Davenport. *Katelyn Metzger*



(Above) Vintage reseller, stylist and photographer Laura Heath poses for a portrait in her shop Trash Can Annie in downtown Davenport on Wednesday, April 16.  
 (Below) Laura Heath shows off vintage buttons for sale at Trash Can Annie.

*Katelyn Metzger*



## DESIGNING WITH DETAILS

Finding and recognizing the quality of those pieces is Heath's specialty. The store sells pieces from the 1870s up to the early 2000s and her eye for authenticity has caught the attention of producers.

Heath helped provide clothing for the 1997 movie "Titanic" and in 2003 assisted with pieces for the Broadway production of "Long Day's Journey Into Night" starring Vanessa Redgrave. Heath has worked with Ralph Lauren on projects and made her Netflix debut with Ryan Murphy's "Hollywood."

Styling has become a substantial part of her business model in the last five years. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Heath knew she had to find a way to keep the doors open.

On her website, Heath offers three different styling packages: personal shopping, creating a capsule wardrobe or a closet edit. She also offers photography packages — another way to flex her creative muscle.

The photos allow her to capture another side of clients in a style uniquely her own. Heath mainly works in black and white, specializing in portraits and nudes but also offering location packages where she provides outfit changes to transform the client to another time period.

For those who just want help with their wardrobe, Heath can do that, too. On personal shopping sessions, she meets with clients at a retail store and helps them find clothes that fit their look while ensuring the look still fits their personality.

"I understood that because I work on movies, and work on Broadway, and work with Juilliard and work with designers, that the knowledge that I have is just there," she said. "I understand more and more that people need my assistance."

And, the customers understand that, too. The Trash Can Annie Instagram and Facebook page are full of fun finds at the shop, and smiling customers in the new threads Heath helped them pick out. Most of the time the items are in her own store, but they don't have to be, she said.

The whole point of the styling is to help the customer find what speaks to them. Heath translates the look from pieces to a whole ensemble.

"I'm fortunate that I have repeat customers from my styling. It's something where it's great if they want to shop through the store, but I also will see



Trash Can Annie owner Laura Heath can be seen in a mirror riffling through a clothing rack. *Katelyn Metzger*

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(Left) Along with accessories and memorabilia, clothing ranging from the early-1900s to the 2000s can be found in the shop. (Above) Laura Heath, who started shopping at Trash Can Annie in the late '70s, took over ownership of the store with her husband in 1996.

*Katelyn Metzger*

where they shop normally, and then I'll help refine their look," she said. "It's great to have the vintage, but people don't always know how to put it together, so I can do that for them, and I can also do it outside of the store."

In the long run, tapping into the personal shopping she was so reluctant to do as a teen was a piece of what she was meant to do all along. She learned something about fashion, and herself, just like her mother said she would.

But, it doesn't leave as much time for the horseback riding she was so apt to prioritize over shopping years ago. While helping customers on a breezy day in May, her vintage cowboy boots clicked across the floor as she walked.

Passion, whether long-established or recently discovered, never goes out of style.

**"I'm fortunate that I have repeat customers from my styling. It's something where it's great if they want to shop through the store, but I also will see where they shop normally, and then I'll help refine their look." - Laura Heath**



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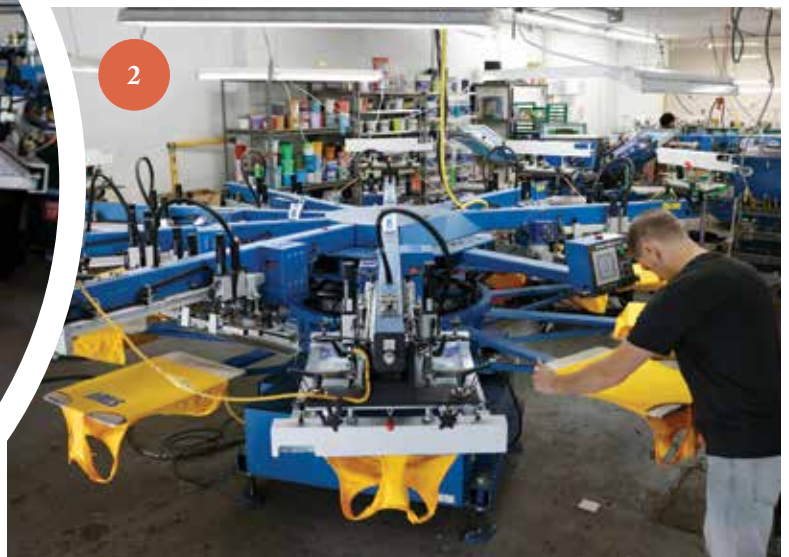
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# Fit to print

**QC Custom Tees & More** offers clothing and promotional item printing and embroidery services for Quad-Cities area businesses, sports teams, clubs and more. The local printing shop produces custom designs for any type of clothing, offering an array of colors and fits. They also offer onsite decorating services for events such as sport tournaments and online shops specific to clients.



**1.** Michael Slyter, owner of QC Custom Tees & More, poses for a portrait next to a screen printing press on Thursday, May 22, in Davenport. Slyter started his printing business a decade ago in his mother's basement. **2.** Since its opening, QC Custom Tees & More has grown to about 20 full-time employees. Owner Michael Slyter credits his 'amazing' staff for the 'well-oiled machine' that is the printing business. **3.** Buckets of screen printing ink are shelved against the back wall of QC Customs Tees & More's printing room. **4.** QC Custom Tees & More boasts two ten-head automatic screen printing presses and one five-head manual screen printing press. *Katelyn Metzger*



**5.** Mike Johnson test prints a t-shirt on a screen printing press at QC Custom Tees & More. An automatic squeegee is used to pass the ink over the screen. **6.** Sean Rupp shows off a freshly made screen after emulsion is washed off.  
*Katelyn Metzger*



★★★★★ Google 4.8 Rating

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**7.** Mike Johnson aligns a screen printing head before running a batch of shirts through. **8.** Examples of promotion items made by QC Custom Tees & More. **9.** Chris Howes puts a freshly printed shirt onto a conveyor belt. Shirts are cured by moving through a dryer. **10.** Katie Rodriguez prepares her machine to embroider a piece of clothing at QC Custom Tees & More. **11.** It takes about 15 minutes to embroider a small logo on a shirt. *Katelyn Metzger*



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# Gigi and Max grows hobby into established children's clothing boutique

Owners **Mike and Kristin Gonzales** pose in the Gigi and Max warehouse lobby on Tuesday, April 22, in Bettendorf. Gigi and Max is an online boutique that focuses on offering children's clothing from newborn sizes to size eight.

*Katelyn Metzger*

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## **GRETCHEN TESKE**

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**C**hildren's clothing brand Gigi and Max started as a hobby but is slowly turning itself into a household name.

Co-owned by husband and wife team Mike and Kristin Gonzales, Gigi and Max is an online boutique that specializes in fun fabric prints for children and even has options for parents. Before they grew into the nationwide company they are today, it started with a headband.

Before Gigi and Max was a company, sewing was just a hobby for Kristin, who in 2014 had recently become a stay-at-home mom. She needed something to keep herself occupied and asked her mom to teach her to sew.

She started with soft, knit fabric and began making headbands for her daughter with big bows on them, called top knots. Kristin was happy with her product, and so were friends who began asking more about them.

"So I started posting to Instagram and listing them on Etsy. And to be legal, I needed a name, so I did not put much weight into the name, just Gigi was for (my daughter), and Max was my nephew that was born a few months prior," she said.

At the time, social media sites like Instagram were still early in their development. If something was posted, everyone saw it, and at the time, Kristin had about 2,000 followers. That's just a fraction of the more than 161,000 followers she now has.

To build up to that, Kristin kept up with the social media posting and selling on Etsy while also trying to up her sewing game and learning how to make clothes. She'd just started learning to sew with a serger, so she could make stronger stitches to hold fabric better.

Then she was invited to a baby shower. "And Mike said, 'Why don't you bring a few outfits for the baby?'" she said. "So, I made three outfits for the mom-to-be and at the shower, the reaction I got was just crazy."



**161,000+**

**Gigi and Max  
Instagram followers**

Gigi and Max started in Kristin and Mike Gonzales' dining room in 2014 when Kristin decided to become a stay at home mom. She started sewing headbands for her newborn as a way to keep her busy. *Katelyn Metzger*





All Cigi and Max apparel is made with soft bamboo viscose.

*Katelyn Metzger*

The whole time, Kristin had been selling her products online and receiving positive reviews, but after getting those same reviews in person, everything clicked, she said. It solidified she had a great idea for a new business, and Mike agreed after hearing about it.

"That sort of catapulted us into this newborn-going-home outfit world," Kristin said.

The outfits they made had sayings like "Hello, world" and "Isn't she lovely" made specifically to be the outfits newborns would wear home from the hospital. Matching headbands came with the girls outfits and hats for the boys.

As soon as Kristen added the new outfits to her social media accounts, they

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(Above) Gigi and Max apparel is tag-less, making it great for children with sensory sensitivities. (Right) Kristin Gonzales shows off the mitten and foot cuffs on the zip-up onesies that fold over to cover hands and feet on Tuesday, April 22, in Bettendorf.

*Katelyn Metzger*

flew off the table faster than the pair could make them.

"At that time, we were sitting at a five-week lead time because Mike was cutting the fabric and I was sewing it," she said.

The sewing operation then moved from the dining room table to the basement and the couple hired a seamstress to help them complete orders faster. As their family expanded to include their son, Gabe, their business was expanding too.

"Then we hired another (seamstress) to come in, so we had three people sewing in a basement," Mike said, adding it got crowded quickly. "We couldn't keep up, so



Gigi and Max are constantly changing the patterns that they offer. The local company drops new patterns each week, which are often holiday or season themed.

*Katelyn Metzger*

we started working with a manufacturer in the U.S."

The couple found a husband-and-wife-owned company in the Boston area that was able to manufacture much faster than the Gonzaleses. With five full-time employees and heavier equipment, the company would receive the patterns, make the outfits and send them back to Bettendorf in record time.

"Something that took me an hour to make was taking them less than 10 minutes," Kristin said.

With their help, Gigi and Max had



products on the shelf ready to ship and the five to six week waiting period went by the wayside. They now had things in stock and were ready to ship for last-minute shoppers.

As online marketplaces expanded, people were getting used to the concept

of having things at their fingertips, Kristin said.

"In our world, you can have that too, and we've never gone away from that," she said.

After a few years, the brand continued to gain speed and the Gonzaleses were

Mike Gonzales shows off the Gigi and Max warehouse on Tuesday, April 22, in Bettendorf. *Katelyn Metzger*



looking to add more details and expand their offerings. It proved to be too much for the U.S.-based company they had found to handle, so they started working with manufacturers overseas.

Mike said the move was mainly for the expertise, because the sewers abroad are experts in their craft. With the help of their on-staff graphic designer, the pair choose all the designs from the print down to the ruffles, pockets and bows on the outfits.

"We basically send them the art and they send us the finished goods after lots of sampling and trials," Mike said. "Everything comes into our warehouse here ... we inspect it, we look it over, we package it up and then we ship it to our customers from right here."

The 'here' Mike referred to is the 6,000 square foot Gigi and Max warehouse in Bettendorf. Tucked into an industrial park, the building is split into a manufacturing side and a commercial side.

In the manufacturing area, rows and rows of racks holding packaged outfits are

carefully labeled. Gigi and Max carries clothing ranging in size from newborn to size 8, as well as pajama and robe sets for parents. They also offer swaddles, blankets and crib sheets, and recently expanded into swimwear — matching towels included.

Employees pack orders twice a day, in the morning and again right before the mail truck comes in the afternoon. They ship to more than 500 retailers, including Von Maur.

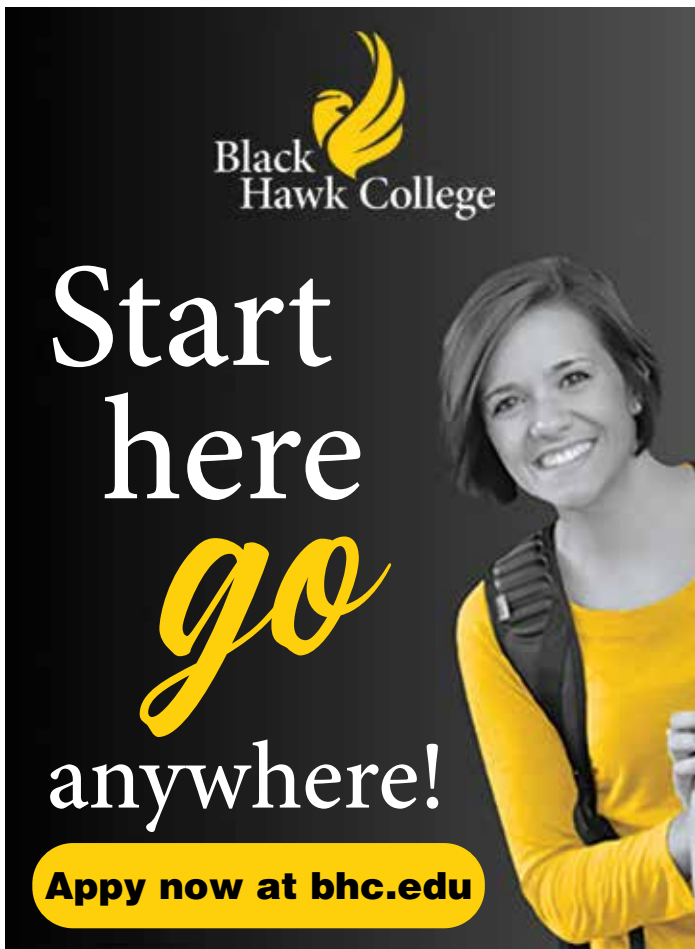
Same day shipping is a big part of the business, and so are exclusive clothing drops.

Every Wednesday, Gigi and Max drops a new print, sometimes multiple at holidays, to keep things fresh. Once all of one design are sold out, they move on to another to help bring customers back in.

Gigi and Max exclusively uses an extremely soft bamboo fabric for their clothing. All the clothing is tag-less to prevent sensory issues. For heavier items like hoodies or joggers, they use a heavier bamboo material that still provides a soft feel with high quality.

On the commercial side of things, the

**Every Wednesday, Gigi and Max drops a new print, sometimes multiple at holidays, to keep things fresh.**



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Kristin Gonzales shows off this year's swimwear line at the Gigi and Max warehouse on Tuesday, April 22, in Bettendorf. Swimsuits are designed with bright neon colors for water safety. *Katelyn Metzger*

Gonzaleses have set up a photo studio in the back where they do all of their own marketing photos and campaigns. They utilize all local models for their website, changing them into Gigi and Max branded

outfits, then sending them home with a gift card for clothing.

That strategy has helped grow their local fanbase in the Quad-Cities, with more and more orders staying in town.

Gigi and Max ships to all 50 states, but is most popular in Texas. Iowa is a close second, Mike said.

In its 11th year, Gigi and Max continues to grow, all thanks to social media. Kristin said TikTok is especially helping the brand gain recognition, as they make videos featuring themselves and showing off their products.

It helps connect them to the brand, and the brand to communities, including their own.

"People love that they can trust us," Kristin said. "We're two people from Iowa and we're selling stuff that we have in our warehouse. It's not pre-order, what you're buying is our brand. And people like that a lot."

**"We're two people from Iowa and we're selling stuff that we have in our warehouse. It's not pre-order, what you're buying is our brand. And people like that a lot."**

**- Kristin Gonzales**



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# Styling success





Owner **Amy DeFauw** poses at the Katsch Boutique Davenport location on Wednesday, May 21. She opened the first Katsch Boutique in Geneseo in 2015.

*Katelyn Metzger*

## **Katsch Boutique** keeps customers stylish while owner helps other entrepreneurs succeed

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**GRETCHEN TESKE**

[gteske@qctimes.com](mailto:gteske@qctimes.com)

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**F**ashion has always been a big part of Amy DeFauw's life, but carving out success in her hometown wasn't always something she had on her vision board.

The owner of Katsch Boutique, DeFauw is an expert on finding clothes that fit the customer, whether formal or casual and anything else in between. She's even branched out with her knowledge, creating another business where she helps boutique owners get their shops off the ground.

But it didn't start off that way.

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin - Madison, DeFauw knew she wanted to be in the retail industry. She moved to Milwaukee, where she worked at the Kohl's corporate headquarters.

"That's where I really learned how to do retail," she said. "They have a very intense training program and I was able to be

Katsch Boutique offers clothing, jewelry, shoes, accessories and home goods. *Katelyn Metzger*

on the business and financial side of the buying office, but also the product and merchandising side of the office as well."

She started in the children's department then moved into home decor, seasonal furniture and Christmas decor. Her role was to analyze what was selling and make sure the right products for the right customers were in stores.

DeFauw ended up staying with Kohl's for seven years, rising through the ranks from analyst to assistant buyer to planner, to eventually become the youngest buyer in the company at the time. Buyers, she said, were in charge of purchasing all the goods for specific categories. It could range from home decor to children's basics to seasonal goods.

"And then you worked with the internal product development team to design your own clothes, and you also worked with merchandise presentation to decide how your floor plan would look with the assortment you bought," she said.



On top of those responsibilities, she had to manage her own internal team and work with internal marketing on the goods. All of that corporate experience helped solidify her confidence and helped build the foundation for her own line of stores she'd open one day.

"It helped me learn how to take some of the emotion out of buying and really think about what the customer wants, and then read into the business financials as

well," she said. "That helped me have a good, solid foundation for the time when I wanted to start my own boutique, (although) I've had to learn a million other lessons the hard way. But that gave me a good, solid foundation."

The idea to open a boutique, she said, came about when she moved back to the Quad-Cities. DeFauw had gotten married, and her husband wanted to come back to start farming with her family.

She could either start over at a local company, she said, or start her own. Back in her hometown, she chose the latter.

"At the time, it was just my husband and I, so we thought this was the perfect time, and I opened in Geneseo in 2015," she said.

DeFauw named the boutique Katsch, a play on her maiden name, Katschnig.

"I had just changed my name, and I was having this whole identity crisis because I was moving home, no one knew who Amy DeFauw was," she said. "And I was like, 'I've got to have a little bit of me in this.'"

Geneseo is about 20 miles east of the Quad-Cities, a small town of 6,500 people. When she first moved back, DeFauw said, there were other boutiques in the quaint downtown area. But nothing quite like what she wanted to sell.



A look at denim selection offered at Katsch Boutique.

*Katelyn Metzger*

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"The biggest compliment in the world is when we have customers that bring their daughters that live in Chicago or LA. They bring them home for the holidays, and then they find a ton of stuff to buy at Katsch." - Amy DeFauw

And nothing that made getting started that easy.

"The original space I was supposed to move into, the landlords were doing some remodels. They completely ghosted me, and then I was able to secure a temporary spot in the third floor of a downtown building," she said. "By the grace of God, another spot opened up and we were able to buy that space in downtown Geneseo."

For the past 10 years, Katsch Boutique has been at 113 N. State Street. But when

the doors first opened, it had less emphasis on the boutique part of things than it does now; her first lesson in business.

"When we first started, it was a lot more home decor than clothes, because that's where my comfort zone was," she said. "But I quickly realized the customer base wanted apparel, and it was a better financial strategy for us to do that as well."

Another thing DeFauw quickly learned on her journey was how supportive the community was. There were other

boutiques in town, she said, but Katsch brought a new vibe to the community that customers wanted to bring their friends and family into.

"The biggest compliment in the world is when we have customers that bring their daughters that live in Chicago or LA. They bring them home for the holidays, and then they find a ton of stuff to buy at Katsch," she said. "They have, and they can, shop anywhere but they choose to shop with us."

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Katsch Boutique focuses on providing classic, high-quality clothing for women.

*Katelyn Metzger*



The name "Katsch" is a play on DeFauw's maiden name, Katschnig.

*Katelyn Metzger*

Three different locations of Katsch Boutique are located in Davenport, Geneseo and Coralville, all carrying similar styles of clothing. *Katelyn Metzger*

With business booming, it didn't take DeFauw long to expand and open another location in Davenport at 5619 Utica Ridge Road in 2019 and her third location at 902 E. Second Street in Coralville in 2022. Expanding was a big step, she said, and made extra difficult from a small business standpoint because she felt like she needed to be good at everything.

"I think a lot of times when people get into the boutique industry, they just think clothes, merchandising, maybe a little marketing, but there's so much more that goes into it," she said. "It's like any business. You have the financial side of things, you have HR, and in this day and age you have to be really good at marketing and have a big social presence so that people can know you and learn about you before they even come in."

One of the biggest changes she's seen since first opening 10 years ago, she said, is the reliance on online shopping. Everything Katsch has in stores is also available online, which is helpful for customers who like to check out the inventory before they come in.

It all goes back to DeFauw's method of learning the customers and what they are looking for, not just what she wants to stock in the shop. With her mind sharp on the business side of things, she started another endeavor as a boutique profit coach to help other entrepreneurs get off the ground.

Retail Math Therapy is a one-on-one coaching business where DeFauw helps new owners map out a plan for success. One of the first things she works with them on, she said, is having a financial plan.



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That can range from a detailed sales plan where she helps owners look at daily and monthly sales goals, to breaking it down even further to see what customers are looking for and purchasing, and not just what the owner likes and wants to sell.

"It's a very emotional thing to run a business, so if you can take some of the personal attachment out of it and look at it at a higher level as a business, it definitely helps get you through the hard times, because there will be hard times," she said.

As an example, DeFauw pointed to her Davenport location, noting it opened

in 2019, right before COVID hit the country. The boutique made it through the pandemic, she said, and then was hit by an influx of customers who had been saving their money and were looking to spend it.

During that time, many other businesses opened as people learned how to sell out of their own homes, she said. But as the money started to even out, not every business made it.

And that's what keeps her motivated to continue, and scale, her coaching business, she said. So far, she's worked

with companies as far away as Florida and Colorado and as nearby as Iowa City and Libertyville.

DeFauw said she has no plans to expand her own retail anytime soon, happy with the three locations she has. But her eventual goal is to create a financial program for boutique owners to take, that helps set them on the path for success.

Once again, it all goes back to knowing what customers want and what business owners need. When it comes to styling for success, DeFauw knows the perfect fit.

**"It's a very emotional thing to run a business, so if you can take some of the personal attachment out of it and look at it at a higher level as a business, it definitely helps get you through the hard times, because there will be hard times." - Amy DeFauw**

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Theo & Co. owner **Annie Stopulos** poses with a rack of tailored clothing in her Downtown Davenport store on Wednesday, April 30.

*Katelyn Metzger*



# Tailored to perfection:

**Theo and Co. provides custom suits, styling for men and women**

**GRETCHEN TESKE**  
gteske@qctimes.com

**F**inding the perfect fit is no problem at Theo and Co. in Davenport. The menswear boutique at 219 E. Second Street is owned by Annie

Stopulos, who specializes in custom suits, alterations and personalized styling.

A Quad-Cities native, she didn't always have her eye on fashion.

When she left the area at 18 to attend the University of Kansas, her sights were set on something, and somewhere, bigger than Davenport.

"While I was there, I kind of always had the itch to get out. I studied abroad ... and then I wanted to get into the film industry," she said. "I took acting in college and moved out to LA going into senior (year) and got an internship at Dick Clark Productions while I was there."



(Above left) Theo & Co. is located at 219 East Second Street in Davenport. (Above right) Fabric swatches are laid out at Theo & Co. Suits can be personalized with fabrics, buttons, embroidery and more. *Katelyn Metzger*

While Los Angeles seemed glamorous and exciting, Stopulos quickly learned she wanted nothing to do with the film industry, or the city. Having been born and raised in a smaller community, she

wasn't used to the fast-paced lifestyle or cut-throat energy of the film industry.

But, she wanted to stay in LA a little longer and eventually found a company called Trunk Club, by Nordstrom. The

styling service was based out of Chicago, but was opening an LA location.

Her sisters encouraged her to give it a shot, she applied and was one of the first eight stylists hired for the LA branch of the company. Before long, it grew to 100 stylists, all working out of a 14,000 square foot building.

"It was a huge success, and that's kind of where I learned everything," she said. "My main background is custom garments, custom clothing and styling. You learn about the textiles, the different types of fabrics, the different types of fits, how to measure and everything in between."

That job is where she fell in love with creating clothing, she said, because it took styling to the next level. The more personalized process appealed to her, and she continued down that path when she eventually left Los Angeles and moved to Kansas City.

**"My main background is custom garments, custom clothing and styling. You learn about the textiles, the different types of fabrics, the different types of fits, how to measure and everything in between."**

**- Annie Stopulos**



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Stopulos takes more than 30 measurements per person, making sure the suit fits perfectly when it's done.



Theo & Co. Co. seamstress **Karen Miranda** tailors a piece of clothing in the storefront on Wednesday, April 30, in Davenport.

*Katelyn Metzger*

There, she found a job working for a custom tailor who styled everyone from bigtime businessmen to Kansas City Chief football players.

"I kind of got the gamut of all different styles. It was really fun to do some things for football players that were going to the ESPYS or getting married and they wanted something cool and unique," she said. "And then you get the businessmen that really wanted the cool sport coats. So I had a lot of fun in Kansas City."

Before long she found herself moving back to Davenport where she could be around family once again. With five brothers and sisters, family is a crucial part of the business process in the Stopulos house.

Her brother, Pete, owns several businesses in the area and had a storefront open at 219 E. Second Street in Davenport if she wanted to try her hand at entrepreneurship. The space was a former tax firm with drop tile ceilings, carpeted floors and cubicles.

The tiles, carpet and cubicles were all removed to reveal exposed brick and wood floors that provided a warm, inviting feeling for a brand-new business. In 2018, Stopulos made the decision to open her own store, selling custom suits.



Bobbins of different colored threads sit at Karen Miranda's sewing table at Theo & Co. *Katelyn Metzger*

Progress was halted in early 2019, however, when a barrier holding back feet of flood water broke in downtown Davenport and put many businesses literally under water. Stopulos was able to navigate a way through, however, and opened shortly after.

The original idea, she said, was to focus on custom garments, but she had to shift the business model a bit to meet the needs of the community. Instead of opening a store with heaps of overhead and hopes people would come in for suits, Stopulos aimed for a mix of retail and suiting, with personal styling included.

This summer, she added a full-time seamstress who can do alterations on anything from jackets to curtains, whether they were purchased in the store or not. For those purchasing a suit in the store, everything is custom down to the color of the stitching.

Below a row of custom suits waiting to be picked up are rows of fabric books with references for everything needed to create the garment. Stopulos takes more than 30 measurements per person, making sure the suit fits perfectly when it's done.



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Theo & Co. specializes in menswear, tailoring and custom suit design.

*Katelyn Metzger*

The suits can be custom made for men or women, with the latter becoming more regular clients. Stopulos said women have a hard time finding pieces that fit, but getting them custom-made alleviates that headache.

"We look at everything and then we build a pattern based on all of their measurements and observations," she said. "They choose a fabric, they choose

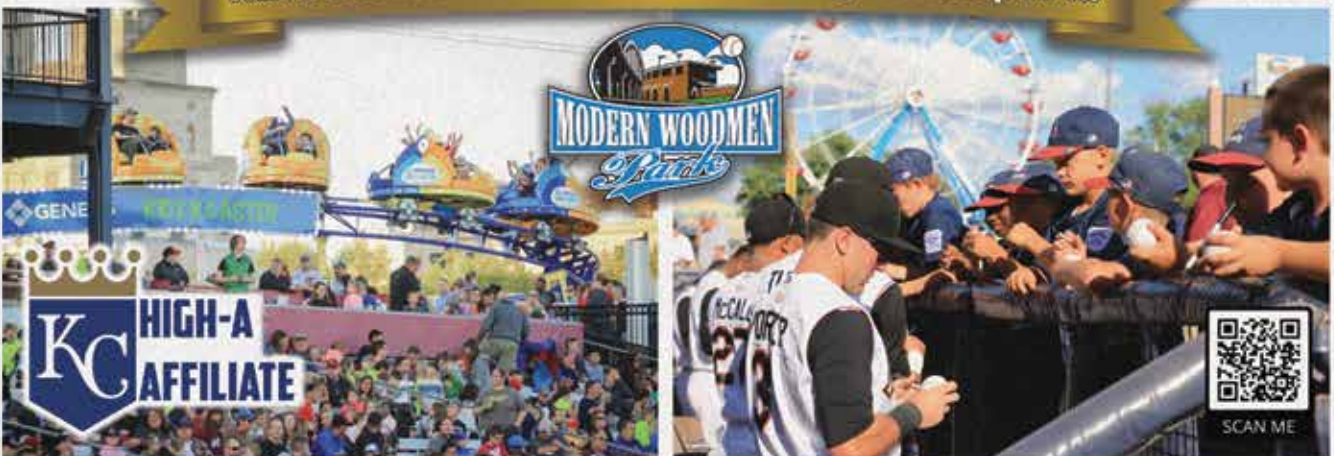
a lining, they choose their buttons, they choose their lapels."

The customization allows for customers to get the fit they want, but one that is completely unique to them. And, it's what makes the store unique to Davenport.

"You're getting a much higher quality garment. It's more expensive, but that suit's gonna last 10-15 years, as opposed to something that's only going to last a few years, max, if you're wearing the suit regularly," she said. "I just love what I do."

**"You're getting a much higher quality garment. It's more expensive, but that suit's gonna last 10-15 years."**

**- Annie Stopulos**



## JULY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		CR 6:30 PM	CR 6:30 PM	CR 6:00 PM	CR	CR
CR 6		FW 8	FW 9	FW 10	FW 11	FW 12
FW 13					PEO 6:30 PM	PEO 5:30 PM
PEO 1:00 PM		WIS 6:30 PM	WIS 6:30 PM	WIS 6:30 PM	WIS 6:30 PM	WIS 5:30 PM
WIS 1:00 PM		SB 29	SB 30	SB 31		

## AUGUST

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					SB 1	SB 2
SB 3		BEL 6:30 PM	BEL 6:30 PM	BEL 6:30 PM	BEL 4:30 PM	BEL 5:30 PM
BEL 1:00 PM		CR 12	CR 13	CR 14	CR 15	CR 16
CR 17		GL 6:30 PM	GL 6:30 PM	GL 6:30 PM	GL 6:30 PM	GL 5:30 PM
GL 1:00 PM		WIS 26	WIS 27	WIS 28	WIS 29	WIS 30
WIS 31						

## SEPTEMBER

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		CR 6:30 PM	CR 6:30 PM	CR 6:30 PM	CR 6:30 PM	CR 5:30 PM
CR 1:00 PM						



HOME

AWAY

OFF

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