

# SEW FINE!

BY LAUREN SIEBEN  
PHOTOS BY DAVID SZYMANSKI

**W**hen Mallory McConnell Colby decided to buy a sewing machine in 2016, she had no thought of turning her new hobby into a side hustle.

"It was kind of a project hatched out of boredom, because my daughter started school," says McConnell Colby, who works as an assistant manager at Odd Duck in Bay View and often doesn't start work until 2 p.m. "I just wanted a project."

McConnell Colby soon began making custom clothing for herself and a few friends. On a whim, she applied to the Milwaukee holiday craft fair Hover Craft and was selected as a vendor. Out of the hundreds of makers that apply, only a fraction are admitted, McConnell Colby notes.

"I got in and it was like, 'I guess I'm doing this now!'" she says.

Less than two years later, McConnell Colby's pastime has evolved into a bona fide business. Today, she operates Elder Tree Goods, selling eco-friendly apparel in her online shop, on Instagram, at local craft fairs and wholesale to Milwaukee boutique Orange and Blue Co. Her flagship piece is a linen T-shirt with a reversible neckline — a scoop neck on one side, a crew neck on the other.

"I like pieces to be as versatile as possible — something you could wear multiple ways, something you could wear with a pencil skirt or jeans," McConnell Colby notes.

She sources her material from a family-owned organic fabric wholesaler based in Texas. She also prides herself on putting her scraps to good use, saving leftover fabric to make pocket squares.

Most of McConnell Colby's pieces are made with linen. "It's such an incredible fabric, and it's super versatile," she explains. "You can get lightweight, tissue-thin linen or something sturdier, like what a pantsuit is made out of."



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Her pre-shrunk linen pieces are also machine washable, which, McConnell Colby says, makes them more accessible to the average buyer.

Whitney Schaefer, owner of Orange and Blue Co., says the versatility of Elder Tree tees is one reason she was eager to stock Elder Tree Goods products in her Brewers Hill boutique.

"I love the simple line and shape of her pieces," Schaefer says. "It's a great staple for summer. The linen is light and comfortable to wear."



McConnell Colby also takes custom orders. Prices range from about \$50 for a sleeveless tank to \$100 for a custom dress, depending on the fabric.

Looking ahead, McConnell Colby plans to continue selling at local craft fairs, including the last NE Waukeez Night Market of the season on Sept. 12. She also plans to expand her wholesale operation and continue partnering with local shops interested in selling Elder Tree apparel.

Someday, she adds, she might even consider a foray into children's apparel. In the meantime, she creates custom pieces for her daughter.

"Sometimes I'll just take her to JOANN [fabric store] and say, 'Pick out something you like, and I'll make a dress for you,'" McConnell Colby says. "She thinks that's pretty cool." **MKE**

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