

*Former New  
Bedford Clothing  
Manufacturer  
Thrives as Clothing  
Refinisher in the  
Global Economy*

“We will do anything that it takes to meet the challenges of our business customers,” insists **Jeff Glassman ’90**. The Isenberg School alumnus is president of Darn It! Inc., a fast-growing New Bedford, Massachusetts provider of diverse services to the apparel industry. The business also doubles as a warehouse and pick/pack distribution node for apparel and general merchandise.



Jeff Glassman '90 and  
Norm Glassman '63

A November visit to the firm by *The Commonwealth* revealed an ordinary day of diverse projects and nonstop activity. On its cavernous floor (Darn It!’s combined factory and warehouse occupies 140,000 square feet), scores of workers operated sewing and embroidery machines; unpacked and reboxed shoes; sorted, pressed, and stored dresses and sport jackets; and spot cleaned and altered garments.

## Alumni Spotlight

Half a dozen women sat at sewing tables replacing buttons with snaps on polo shirts sporting a Fortune 500 logo. A second group of Darn It! employees replaced mislabeled sweaters with new labels identifying their contents as 100% luxury cashmere. And a third cluster of workers used black magic markers to X out information on the labels of children’s pajamas. “None of our machines and work tables are bolted down. We can move and reconfigure operations on a dime,” notes Jeff.



“On the warehouse side of our business we have many customers who prefer not to maintain their own warehouses. They send us their finished products to inventory, store and ship to their customers at their request,” Jeff explains. In its even more sprawling warehouse space, Darn It! housed unlikely bedfellows. Boxes of olive oil shared floor space with 100 trailers-worth of recently arrived art supplies and 142 pallets of Dove soap. “It’s a pick, pack and ship warehouse,” remarks Jeff’s father, **Norm Glassman ’63**. Norm continues to participate actively in Darn It! as a business alter ego to his son.

“Our two greatest assets are our people and our space,” Jeff continues. The firm has about 120 employees, many with seasoned tailoring skills and a strong work ethic. At the same time, Darn It! relies on temp services to help meet its increasing spikes in demand. “We never know what challenges—what

orders—are going to surface each day. We need to be agile enough to respond decisively.”

Darn It! and many other business tenants occupy space which formerly housed Berkshire Hathaway—a mill that once employed thousands of New Bedford textile workers. Legendary financier Warren Buffet purchased the textile company in 1965, acquired the name Berkshire Hathaway, and sold the site in 2000 to its present owner, who rents to Darn It!

The firm’s apparel customers include a cross-section of that industry—big box and catalog retailers; clothing manufacturers and importers; and wholesalers, distributors, and liquidators. Darn It!’s general merchandise customers, which rely on the firm for storage and related services like product inspection, repacking, and returns processing, represent a similarly broad spectrum of retailers, wholesalers, distributors, and liquidators.

**Expecting the Unexpected.** Given their diverse customer base with its own unpredictable demands, the Glassmans arrive at work each day expecting the unexpected. For example, notes Jeff, a Darn It! customer opens a container shipped from China to find racks of clothes strewn about in transit. The customer reroutes the container to the Glassmans, who will inspect, sort, press, and inventory the clothes. A second manufacturer, which had affixed a store’s label to thousands of shirts before the order was cancelled, called on Darn It! to substitute another store’s labels to resell the goods.

When a customer receives a shipment of shirts with buttons of the wrong shape or color, it can funnel the lot to the Glassmans, who will make it right. Too many shirts or pants left over at a retail chain from the winter and spring seasons? Darn It! will shorten sleeves and transform pants into shorts. ( In a recent shipment, the business transmuted 22,000 such pairs of pants.)

“We do lots of inspections for our customers,” observes Norm. “Besides finding sewing flaws, we discover discolorations, mildew, and odors. Much is salvageable either through sewing, laundering, pressing, dry cleaning or exposure to fresh air.”

#### **Business Roots and Adaptation.**

Darn It! was the direct descendant of the Glassman’s once-teeming clothing contracting business, Ronnie Manufacturing (honoring Norm’s wife and Jeff’s mother, Ronya). Founded in 1967 by Norm and his father Meyer, Ronnie Manufacturing at its peak employed 350 people (including 145 stitchers). The business focused on contract manufacturing of women’s sportswear, including blazers, pants, skirts, and jackets. During the 1980s, the firm’s fortunes, like almost every other textile manufacturer in the Northeast, free-fell against an onslaught of low-cost competitors—first in the Southeast, and then in Mexico, the Caribbean, and overseas.

Searching for new niches in the industry, Norm tried making women’s coats and fleece garments. That’s when Jeff joined the firm. Not long after his arrival in the mid 1990s, Jeff and

Norm started what he describes as “a little repair module,” which became the forerunner of Darn It! “One of our first big repair jobs was for an American manufacturer importing garments from Mexico. Two trucks of pants were sent to our factory from Mexico,” Norm recalls. “One truck got hijacked but the other made it through with 30,000 pairs of pants. The pants needed labels, hangers and plastic bags to be changed.”

It was a sad day in 1994, when Norm gathered his remaining 100 employees to inform them of Ronnie Manufacturing’s closing. About 75 employees stayed on as the repair business took off, thanks to a growing, largely uncontested market for its services in the Northeast. “As we’ve grown, we’ve begun to market ourselves nationally,” Jeff continues, citing recent customers in West Virginia and Texas. “Fuel costs have dampened the pace of our national expansion, but the Web has worked in its favor. We had underestimated the power of the Web. Soon after we started placing ads in Google, a response from a California firm to launder and repackage more than 150,000 shirts instantly changed our outlook.”



Darn It! knows relabeling.



### Valuing the UMass Connection.

Norm graduated in 1963 from the Isenberg School (then the School of Business Administration) with a degree in accounting. After a six-month stint with the U.S. Coast Guard, he stopped off in his home town, New Bedford, before heading for interviews with public accounting firms. “My father’s small contracting sewing business was ailing and I felt that helping out was the right thing to do,” he explains. Later, his brothers Mark and Stephen joined the firm and Nanette Manufacturing—the name of his father’s company morphed into Ronnie Manufacturing. When Norm joined the firm it employed 25. Under Norm’s leadership, the firm grew fourteen-fold.

In the 1990s, history repeated itself when Jeff joined and helped transform his father’s business. At the Isenberg School, Jeff preferred pragmatic courses like Jim Theroux’s class in entrepreneurship and Dean Schroeder’s case study class in business operations. (Today, he remains connected to the school as a member of its Business Advisory Council.) After graduating with a degree in finance, Jeff joined Filene’s, where he became business coordinator of its newly formed creative advertising department in its Boston corporate headquarters. After that, he joined Milton’s, a Braintree-based chain of men’s clothing stores, as its operations manager.

In 1994, Jeff left Milton’s to join his father in the family business. Later that year, when his dad announced the closing of the manufacturing plant, Jeff was tempted to leave the company and join Smith Barney in a managerial role. But he decided to stay and help reinvent the family business.



Father-and-son inspection team

“There were several reasons why I chose New Bedford, including family ties and a preference for entrepreneurship over the corporate world,” he confesses. And, of course, Jeff also sensed a great opportunity in growing the repair side of the business. Today, Jeff and his wife, Lori, live in Sharon with their two sons, Noah and Jack.

“UMass has been a valuable asset for the extended Glassman family,” notes Norm, who is currently on the Advisory Board at the Charlton College of Business at UMass Dartmouth. Besides Norm and Jeff, graduates of the Amherst campus include Norm’s brother, **Steve ’67 (HTM)**, and Steve’s three children, **Russell ’96 (Animal Science)**, **Kim ’98 (Nutrition)** and **Michael ’00 (Management)**. **Doug ’04**, the son of Norm’s other brother, Mark, is also an Isenberg School graduate. “UMass has been a

great experience for every one of us,” Norm emphasizes. “That’s no doubt why new generations of the family have kept on enrolling and graduating.”

Darn It!’s own success rivals the successful adaptation of businesses in the case studies that Jeff encountered as a student at the Isenberg School. “Before manufacturing moved offshore, business customers typically sent defective products back to the manufacturer,” he emphasizes. “Back then, they were more directly accountable. Today, with more intermediaries along supply and distribution chains and with thousands of geographically dispersed sewing operations of variable quality, there are more opportunities for error. Overseas manufacturing may have been the writing on the wall for Ronnie Manufacturing, but it’s opened a world opportunity for Darn It! □