

## Immokalee women learn to sew as a business opportunity

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Handmade Immokalee, a weekly class for sewing, teaches local women sewing skills.



The skirt Lusvi Perez was working on was different. The garment, made of several pieces of black and flowered fabric, had a challenging cut, she said, sitting in class next to her sewing machine.

“Before I started to put together the pieces of fabric, I thought it wasn’t going to work out,” she said.

But now, with the sewing machine needle moving up and down, the skirt is coming together. So were eye pillows and a pillow case that other students were working on in their Immokalee sewing class. Perez, 32, said that maybe when she learns enough, she will be able to create professional designs she can make money on.

That is the long-term goal of Naples fashion designer Gwendolyn Gleason, who has taught the Immokalee women to sew by machine once a week since November.



*Fourth-grader Rosa Pedro holds a pillow case that her mother Eulalia Pedro Mateo made during a class in Immokalee on July 6, 2016. Handmade Immokalee is a weekly class devoted to helping local women develop sewing skills.*

Gleason hopes women learning the process can sew garments like blouses, scarfs, eye pillows with chamomile and lavender, or other items, and sell them to stores under the brand Handmade in Immokalee.

She said she has sold some eye pillows and hopes by Christmas that the women will have enough products to be sold in a farmers market to the seasonal visitors to Southwest Florida.

For now, she said, women learn new skills. Some of them, she said, knew a little about sewing, but for many it was their first time.

“It helps them build their self-esteem, I find,” she said. “It gives them community. They meet with other women.”

Perez, who came from Guatemala in 2001, said her mother used to sew. Perez didn’t like it. But now that she has her own children, she looks at it differently.

“It allows me to do work at home and be with my children,” she said.

Perez, who lives in a two-bedroom trailer with her husband and children, said the money would come in handy. She used to pick chilies in the fields but now stays home to take care of her kids.

Perez already performs some clothing alterations and makes simple dresses at home. But she has to decline requests for more complicated designs. The sewing classes could help her produce more challenging garments, like the black and flowered skirt she is sewing for her daughter.

“I wouldn’t be so afraid,” she said.

Since November, she said, she has learned to do new fabric cuts, pleats and sew buttonholes by machine. She did a pillow case with a design of a yellow flower she liked. Gleason, she said, gave her a sewing machine so she can practice at home.



*Fashion designer Gwendolyn Gleason shows Linda Mejia some threading tips during a sewing class in Immokalee on July 6, 2016. Gleason is a volunteer for Handmade Immokalee, a weekly class devoted to helping local women develop sewing skills.*

Perez is one of the women in class with more advanced knowledge. Others, Gleason said, had never sewed before starting the lessons.

The classes are hands-on, she said, so the women stay engaged.

“I try to have them make something so they get involved,” she said.

She wanted to empower women in Immokalee, she said. She and Susan Golden, executive director of Immokalee Housing and Family Services, worked together to create the program.

Golden said the program could create opportunities for women while reintroducing them to embroidery or other sewing they may have done in their own countries. They could learn a skill and maybe help revive a lost art.

Rural Neighborhoods, a nonprofit that offers affordable housing in Immokalee, is helping the program with logistics and accepting donations on its behalf.

Gleason said she purchased a sewing machine for one woman so she could sew when she is away from Immokalee. Women now have to share machines they use in class, she said. The program has received some donated equipment and fabric, but Gleason said she's had to pay to fix or buy machines.

Priscilla Roman, community engagement coordinator at Rural Neighborhoods, translates Gleason's classes for those women who don't speak English. Roman said the number of women who attend classes ranges from 10 on down. Some women start, but then move north to follow the crops, she said. But new women are also coming.

She said the program is teaching them to sew but also has other goals.

"To empower women to do things on their own," she said. "They can be leaders in the community."