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Interest in garment construction and do-it-yourself fashion has boomed as a result of the Emmy-nominated reality television series “Project Runway”, now entering its fifth season. Authorized Brother Innov-ís dealer - Tony Coulson of S & R Sewing & Vacuum in Alabama has focused this increase in interest where he and his staff think it counts the most: young kids and teens.

S & R, which sells Brother International Corporation’s full line of sewing, quilting and embroidery machines, knows a lot about capitalizing on this revived interest in sewing. Owner Tony Coulson is the fourth generation in his family in the sewing machine industry since 1900. Coulson and his education director (and mother), Gay Campbell, have been inspired to continue their “Summer Fun Kids Camp,” a sewing education class, throughout the rest of the year. This is due in part to the buzz surrounding this season of “Project Runway.”

“When the ‘Project Runway’ television series started gaining national attention it stirred up even more interest in sewing,” Campbell said. So she created classes for younger kids to capitalize on this interest. Participation was slow initially, but by spring the demand for classes had increased to a point where Campbell re-launched the Summer Fun Kid’s Camp for ages 8 and up in June. Sewing classes for the younger age group are not new to S & R’s education calendar. The dealership has had learn-to-sew kids’ classes in the past, but Coulson and Campbell took it a step further when they created a monthly Kids Club as an offshoot of their popular Huntsville Embroidery Club for adults. That monthly club, with a total membership of about 250 women, has been meeting at S & R for eight years. A few years ago its



The 8-11 year-old group.

members asked S & R to create a similar monthly project-oriented club for younger sewers, and the Campbell’s listened to their customers.

The Summer Fun Kid’s Camp started with a full week of daily classes to teach young sewers basic techniques on Brother’s Limited Edition “Project Runway” sewing machines, specifically the Innov-ís 40 and Innov-ís 80. “Students responded well to the easy-to-use computerized sewing machines that bore the familiar ‘Project Runway’ logo,” said Campbell.

In the first few weeks at camp the projects included drawstring beach bags, peasant tops and shorts, Capri pants and monogrammed “diva bags.” Then, in a series of weekly follow-up classes, the students built on the basic techniques with more complex projects such as pajamas and a personalized bath wrap.



A happy camper enjoying the Brother Limited Edition “Project Runway” sewing machine.



Tony Coulson, owner of S & R Sewing and Vacuum.

complexity to meet the sewers’ growing abilities and will include such aspects as quilting techniques and teachers’ gifts. She has a lot of repeat students but expects to gain some new enrollees as kids show off their completed projects at school.

“They were extremely excited when they got to make things themselves,” Campbell said. Some students were so motivated by learning to sew that they also took projects home to work on. And two of the students have demonstrated particular talent and possible interest in fashion design as a career.

“It’s hard to get adults to sign up for mid-afternoon classes because they are often chauffeuring kids to

“Eighteen students took part in the Summer Fun Kid’s Camp, and because of their enthusiasm, the class will morph into an after-school format, meeting once a week until the end of 2008,” explained Campbell.

The projects will increase in

sports or music lessons. Why not let sewing become one of those after-school choices?” questioned Campbell. The answer for S&R was to put its classes up against more typical after-school activities.

“Not all kids are into soccer or music,” says Campbell. “[Sewing] gives them another venue...it gives them the ability to create.” Education has always ranked high in priority for S & R, says Coulson. “That is what sets me apart from my competitors. I’m able to offer what others are not - a state-of-the-art education center and product-trained employees. Yes, it costs more to do it this way, but it has boosted my business,” he says.

When S & R moved its Huntsville store from a 1,200 square-foot location into the current 5,000-square-foot building four years ago, it dedicated nearly one-third of its space to a new education facility. The classroom includes a full audio-visual system, including cameras and overhead projection.

S&R credits Brother’s association with “Project Runway” for stimulating the younger generation’s interest in sewing as a way to explore one’s creativity. The company’s innovative technology and machinery has also been a critical part of the scenario. “I think Brother saw an opportunity to create interest in sewing for the younger generation. They followed through with the plan and with the equipment to implement that plan, making an awesome opportunity for us to reach this new group of customers!” she said.

In addition to classes, Campbell also oversees monthly special events for S & R, bringing in such headliners as Mary Mulari, Walter Floriani and Anita Goodesign. S & R also has a strong relationship with Martha Pullen, and participates twice a year in Pullen’s well-known School of Art Fashion as a vendor and in providing on-site machine service and repair.



The 11-16 year-old group.