

YOUR CLOTHES HAVE A LITTLE WEAR AND TEAR? SHE'LL REPAIR!

May 13, 2025



MEET SUSTAINABILITY SEAMSTRESS LIBBY FEARNLEY

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By Liz Welch

I was cooking dinner when it happened—a big splotch of oil leapt from the pan onto my brand new sweatshirt. One that I love—for its fit and feel! Also, my first hemp clothing purchase! (Jungmaven for those who want to know.) To say I was bummed would be an understatement. I did not want to throw it away (even though it was biodegradable), and I certainly did not want to donate a stained top to Goodwill.

And then I had a thought: The splotch was smack dab in the middle of my chest.

What if I found a way to turn into an even cooler sweatshirt? I went onto Etsy and found an embroidered patch that looked like a black and white version of the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland. I texted my friend and fellow Coop member since 2010 (food processing shift, to be exact), Libby Fearnley, who takes sustainable fashion to a whole new (literally and figuratively) level.

I have a job for you!

Libby started her Instagram account @TheBigKeep in June 2023. Her first post was an image of her sewing machine and the caption, “Keeping is part of who I am. It’s not hoarding. It’s not clinging. It’s a respect for the life and energy embedded into every fiber of our lives.”



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

Seamstress Libby Fearnley

The first example of what she meant by “keeping” was a tunic that was given to her by a friend who no longer wore it. It was the perfect style for Libby’s then postpartum body. She shared two images: the knee length, sleeveless button up pale gray chambray tunic, then the chic crop top she turned it into. The Instagram caption reads: “I removed about six inches from the midsection, added a waist seam, taking in the excess at the center front placket and adding a center back seam, because I like the curved hem.”

With her spitfire imagination and years-long commitment to fighting everyday waste, Libby has made it her mission to reincarnate beloved items—as well as those that have been spilled on, munched on by moths, worn through, or worse.

This is not your typical tailor drop off: Libby brings life to beloved items. Another few items that she has lovingly repaired: her husband’s favorite jeans, whose back pocket was rendered nearly nonexistent by his wallet; her baby’s worn out romper, retrofitted. (She removed the scratchy collar, fixed the crumpled applique and replaced the spent elastic in order to give it to a relative’s newborn.)

Libby was out for a run one day when she dreamed up Keep. The mother of three boys, and a former fashion designer for labels including Aeropostale, Express and Jones New York, Libby was looking for a way to marry her expertise and her passion for sustainability.

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After graduating from Syracuse University with a degree in fashion, Libby got a job designing women’s sportswear and sleepwear for the May Department stores in St

Louis. That gig had her crisscrossing the globe, to Hong Kong, Korea and India working with partners in each place to make samples. She moved to New York with May, and there found a new job at a smaller leather company called Bernardo. For this role, she visited the factories where the clothing was made. “I remember going to one in mainland China in December, and it was freezing cold,” she says. “Everyone had their puffer coats on—I could not imagine working these industrial sewing machines with frigid fingers.”

Eventually, she began working as a freelance designer in the world of fast fashion, which she found depressing.

“Old men were discussing what 14-year-old girls should be wearing,” she recalls. “It was gross. They had no interest in my input.”

At one job, she was called a diva for not wanting to move into a new department, when she was eight-months pregnant with her first child. “My boss said, who do you think you are? J.Lo?”



It was during her maternity leave when she began to reconsider her career.

“There was so much stress around making something that was not having a positive impact on the world,” she explains. Plus, the pressure-cooker life was not conducive to new motherhood. Working with factories in Asia, where their morning was her evening, often meant returning home at midnight.

The final straw was when a woman she was working for said: “Libby, I think you’re forgetting that our customers are followers. We’re designing for the follower, not the leader.”

Instead of returning to that thankless world, Fearnley stayed home and had another son. When her husband, a professor of organic chemistry at CUNY, took a sabbatical, the family went to Cambridge, England for a year. “I wasn’t working,” she recalls, “and so instead of buying new clothes, I bought a needle and thread.”

A seed was planted.

Fearnley first learned to sew in a middle school home economics class—and then honed her practice in college. During her junior year abroad in London, she interned for the designer Sonia Nuttyal. “I sewed lots of buttons, hooks-and-eyes by hand sewing,” she recalls. “And lots of hems, too!” Being back in England with her family all those years later reminded her of her love of hand sewing—this time, she was mending her family’s clothing instead of designer clothes.

And then, when she returned to New York, she received a mailer for “Sustainable Fashion Entrepreneurship” classes at FIT. Six three-hour classes for \$115 each lead to her certificate in sustainable design. “It was 2013, so the term was still new,” she says. “The more I read about it, the more I thought, this makes so much sense!”

One of her biggest struggles in the corporate world of fashion was the practice of over-sampling. “I’d design one style, and they’d sample it from four or five different factories in four or five different colors,” she says. “That meant 25 samples for one style. And if you did a long-sleeve version, that meant 50.” In order to save on paying duty taxes, the samples were “mutilated”—either by ripping, or cutting the item before being shipped overseas. “It was painful,” Fearnley recalls. “After we were done, we had to throw them all out.”



At FIT, she submerged herself in this growing field that focused on making clothing not just more environmentally conscious, whether by recycling textiles, or making fibers out of bacteria. She also learned about workers' rights. "There are factories that hold on to migrant workers' passports—so they're trapped because they don't have the documentation to leave," she explains. "Some places use forced child labor. It's hideous."

The more she learned, the more impassioned she became, and even began teaching a course in the Sustainable Fashion curriculum called "Current Events and Innovations in Sustainable Fashion" as the field was evolving so rapidly, there was always a new technology to report on. By this point, she was raising three children on her husband's income in a one-bedroom apartment, supplementing with teaching and a few writing jobs.

All the while, her sister was passing along hand-me-downs from her two boys, for Libby's to wear next. "I learned how to mend out of need, not out of desire—and I found

it to be really satisfying.”

Fast forward to the fateful run in Prospect Park in the spring of 2023. Libby was wondering how she could make more money in the field she loved. “While I market myself as a sustainability expert in fashion, finding work in corporate sustainability requires a Master’s degree,” she explains. “I’ve probably applied for over 100 jobs over the past five years—and have had two interviews and not made it past that point. The universe was sending me a signal.”



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRULE

Reporter Liz Welch holding her “patched” sweatshirt

As she was wondering what else she could do, she ran past a sign that read KEEP RIGHT—and had an epiphany.

“‘Keep’ has so many meanings,” she says. “To hold on to something. Or, ‘how are you keeping?’ Like, ‘how are you doing?’ Also, the company you keep is key. There was something about that word that resonated.” On that run and many others, she continued to meditate on this idea as it related to sustainable fashion. “I’d be running and would stop to take notes on my phone,” she says. She kept coming back to the idea that she wanted her next venture to be about more than fixing clothes.

“Tailors can hem and mend things,” she explains. “This felt bigger to me. It’s about taking the time to figure out what material things are important to us. What is worth putting energy into? Fixing the broken things that matter.”

Like my hemp sweatshirt! The one that I brought to Libby and she turned it into my now favorite top—and made a terrific reel about the process with the caption, “This keeper didn’t give up on this cozy @jungmaven sweatshirt when it got stained! Instead, they asked me to sew this rad cat patch over the stain. Consider it kept!”

“I WASN’T WORKING, AND SO INSTEAD OF BUYING NEW CLOTHES, I BOUGHT A NEEDLE AND THREAD.”

LIBBY FEARNLEY

I was so pleased—with the item, the concept and the video—that I shared the reel with a bunch of friends. Word has gotten out that Libby will repair your favorite moth eaten cardigan, or patch your beloved blue jeans. She gets a lot of puffer coats with annoying tears, as well as baby blankets. She can also do more elaborate repairs—

like a pair of tapestry slacks.



Cheshire Cat patch

She often makes reels of her repairs, and last December, one of them went viral. It happened to star another keeper: her father.

“I tried to order my dad a replacement of his favorite Scottish flat cap and learned that it was going to take 16 weeks, which was not enough time before his 80th birthday,” she says. “So I found a pattern online but still couldn’t get our family tartan fabric in ample time.” Instead, she used her kids’ tartan ties they had outgrown. As she was disassembling them, she discovered that they were moth eaten.

“I threw them in the freezer for a few days, then took them apart and patchworked together the flat cap,” she says. It was sentimental as she remembered her dad buying that cap when she was studying abroad in London. “We made a trip to Inverness,

where our people hail from,” she recalls. It was on that trip that he bought his beloved hat, which he wore for more than a decade before absentmindedly leaving it on top of his car and then driving off.”

Libby’s video entails her process—starting with her son’s tartan ties—and then ends it with her dad opening her gift. When he realizes she made it for him, he gets emotional. He puts it on and smiles wide, “I love it! I love it!” he says. “What’s lost has been found!”

Libby has recently launched a workshop series so she can share her skills. So far, she has taught a basic mending class, a denim workshop and another about sock darning. A visible mending workshop is upcoming.

For more information about Keep and upcoming workshops, go to: www.keepmending.com.

Liz Welch is a writer and book collaborator. She worked with designer Prabal Gurung on his new memoir Walk Like A Girl.