

Ep.2.44 - Gina Thorsen

Mon, Dec 05, 2022 10:33AM 25:26

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

stormy, people, business, big, hat, michigan, sewing, ironwood, b2b, products, wisconsin, company, dad, moved, lake superior, long, gina, manufacturing, sell, cover

SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Gina Thorsen

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm your host Ed Clemente, and welcome to the show. Today we have Gina Thorsen, she's the CEO and co-owner of Jacquart Fabric Products, and also home of Stormy Kromer. I know I probably messed up a couple of things in there, but you can correct me Gina, welcome to the show.
- G** Gina Thorsen 00:47
Thank you for having me.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:50
And I think we should start out first, even though Stormy Kromer is pretty big brand name, why don't you start out just quickly what you overall the company does beyond just that.
- G** Gina Thorsen 01:04
Sure. Well, overall, Jacquart Fabric Products is a sewing manufacturer that was started by my grandfather in the late 50s here in the Western UP. So we have a long history of manufacturing

all kinds of sewn products for all kinds of industries. And you know, in the last 20 years is when Stormy Kromer became a part of what we do, but we're really just a very skilled sewn products manufacturer.

E Ed Clemente 01:34

And you were very gentle with saying Western UP but you're located in Ironwood, correct?

G Gina Thorsen 01:40

We are in Ironwood, the western most point in the in the State of Michigan. So on the border of Wisconsin, and over here on Central time also, which which trips some people up sometimes.

E Ed Clemente 01:51

Oh, yeah. I used to do hearings up in Escanaba when I was a Administrative Law Judge, and we would have people show up an hour late all the time. Yeah. And you're Ironwood, is that, I keep forgetting, is that were Izzo's from?

G Gina Thorsen 02:08

No, he's an iron Iron Mountain. Yep.

E Ed Clemente 02:11

Iron Mountain, that's the one that's further east of you actually. [Correct. Correct.] Yeah. A lot of people don't realize that big slant up in the UP because you're really kind of close to Minnesota too, right?

G Gina Thorsen 02:23

Yeah, we're two hours from Minnesota. So you know, that's where, as a kid that's that's where we went for back to school shopping and big shopping trips was actually Duluth, Minnesota. So it's it's an odd geography over here.

E Ed Clemente 02:36

Yeah. You know, and like Marquette, Duluth is all of a sudden becoming kind of a hotspot for people who want to live there now, which is surprising.

G Gina Thorsen 02:45

Yea, very trendy kind of place to be. It's yeah, it's a great town.

E

Ed Clemente 02:50

Yeah. So let's get back to your products a little bit. I think, why don't you just kind of give us a general beyond the Stormy Kromer part, but why don't you just tell us everything else you guys make and some of your history of the company and how you guys got there. And you know how you purchased it an all that.

G

Gina Thorsen 03:06

Sure. I mean, the the humble beginnings of Jacquard Fabric Products were very small sewn projects. My grandpa started sewing bank deposit bags in his basement, went on the days that he was off from his day job as a fireman. So he would have a 24 hour shift at the fire hall and then he would be off for 24 hours and and like most people in my family, we don't, we're not much for sitting around and being idle. And so he started sewing, and started off by making these zip top little bank deposit bags that had the name of the bank sort of foil stamped on the front. He eventually moved into what had been his father's grocery store here in Ironwood, and set up shop there, so moved out of the basement into there. And a lot of what they did early on, was just small projects. My dad joined his father in the early 70s and my dad was really a, he's a maker at heart, like he's a craftsman, he loves to make thing. So he taught himself how to make boat covers, he taught himself how to upholster furniture. So the business started with a lot of small custom kind of work. And he was actually fitting a boat cover across the border in Bayfield, Wisconsin, has a very nice marina, a lot of affluent people are there in the summer. So, he's fitting a boat cover for a gentleman there and he said, hey, you've ever done any production work? And my dad said, well, no, but I feel like I could. And so that was the actual the first larger contract that we had as a company was for this gentleman. He was a physical therapist from Florida and he had a catalogue of physical therapy type supplies and we made back pillows for them for probably 30 years, out of that little incident with my dad. Then for the next you know, all those years, that was probably in 1980, approximately and between then and now we've had big contracts making dog beds, gun cases, we currently make covers for Boss Snowplow, so for one of their products needs a vinyl cover, we make those. We've done a lot of medical products, we currently make the awning for a company called Rainbow Play System. So if you think about the cedar swing sets in people's backyards, and they've got a little red, yellow, and blue top, we make the tops for them. So we've got we make a tent for a company, that is for winter camping. So it's that's sold under their brand name, but we manufacture for them. So we've just, we've had this, my dad had always led the company with this thought process that if it is a sewn product, we can figure out how to make it. So we never limited himself by industry or anything like that. He just jumped on whatever opportunity, and particularly trying to look for those things that like didn't make sense to be imported. So like large covers for Boss Snowplow, the freight on moving those things around is crazy. So like making those here make sense. Dog beds was really like high SKU count and so there were so many we offered for the company we made them for we offered so many colors and sizes. And that's just you know, overseas tends to be more like high volume lower SKUs, versus, you know, us doing lower volume with many skews. So we've been able to find these niches that makes sense to keep sewing in America.

E

Ed Clemente 06:46

And I mean, just so you know, my family owned the bar, so we use those blue bags or whatever color you made them for the bank. Yeah, because we used to have to drop off deposits all the time in those bags, because they had a lock on them too sometimes. Right? [Exactly.] Yeah. No, I was very familiar with those for a long time is working the late shift and going to the bank drop off. So and I think also you're sewing also, is that unique, or is that sort of like there's not a lot of other companies probably around you that do this even are there?

G

Gina Thorsen 07:21

Around here? No, not currently. Although like when I was growing when I was a kid here and you know, earlier parts of the business, there were a number of sewing factories sort of in the region. In fact, we have two main buildings here on our campus. And one of them when we purchased it, purchased it from a company that was a sewing factory. So it was kind of already set up to be a sewing factory, which is interesting. But it's certainly, you know, most sewing went overseas in the 80s and into the early 90s. And so it's it is definitely somewhat unique. It's you know, we have to train people to do it. It's not something that really we get workers showing up knowing how to do industrial sewing. So it's, you know, that's a challenge, but but across the country there, there are still people doing this work and doing it well. And in fact, we're even partnering with with other folks to help increase our capacity. So there's a small network of us, but we definitely still exist as a part of the manufacturing landscape.

E

Ed Clemente 08:20

And I don't know if this is something that affected you. But during COVID I mean, I seen tents, everywhere. And you see all these now tents being opened up outside restaurants and did that affect you. I mean, did you guys get into that business to a little bit or no?

G

Gina Thorsen 08:35

We got into the mask and gown business in 2020. And we were we did it really, really quickly. We were shut down for a day or two before we had retooled and had a big order for face coverings to start with. And then eventually got an order of a really large order for fabric gowns as well. So that helped us stay open, keep our folks employed. Most of our employees wanted to keep coming to work they didn't want they didn't want to sit home. And so that was that helped us do all those things. It was it was really a lifeline until we could get back on track with our normal manufacturing.

E

Ed Clemente 09:17

Well, there's also something to be said about the good work ethic among Yoopers anyway. [Absolutely] Yeah, I know a lot of friends, I used to have property up there myself and I used to work with a lot of friends up there. And by the way, one of our folks that recommended you highly too, is Marty Fittante, a former guest of ours too as well with InvestUP. But so let's tell us a little bit of story a story of Stormy Kromer, too.

G

Gina Thorsen 09:46

Sure. So Stormy Kromer has a very long and rich history. It was It dates back to 1903 and it was started by a gentleman whose name was Stormy Kromer. Stormy was his nickname because he had apparently a very bad temper. So his name was George, Stormy and he lived near Green Bay, Wisconsin. So that's where it originated. And he was a semi-pro baseball player, apparently everything we've heard he loved baseball. But he met a woman and fell in love with her and when he asked her father if he could marry his daughter, he said not until you get a real job. So that's when George found some work on the railroad. So that was his day job for the rest of his career. But he, the legend is, that he lost one too many hats on the train and came home one night to his lovely wife Ida and had an old one of his old baseball caps. So old wool baseball cap and he asked her to make some modifications to keep it on his head and keep his ears warm. So she added that ear band that we have that ties in the front and sort of the rest, the rest was history. They eventually moved their factory to Milwaukee and it was there for long you know, almost 100 year. And when I grew up it was a thing here you know, mostly older men wore wore their black Kromer caps, but actually it was a trend for us when we were in middle school to wear it on the ski hills. It's just you know, pre helmets on ski hills, we would wear black Kromer caps. And so the there was a local store here in Ironwood that sold the hats, and he called to Milwaukee to place an order and they said, oh, I'm sorry, we're not making those anymore. [Wow.] And so this gentleman knew my dad and he just came right in here and said, they're not going to make Kromer caps anymore, and you should do something about it. And a month later, my dad had been down to Milwaukee and with a handshake, he agreed to not even buy the whole company just by the ability to make this hat and call it a Stormy Kromer. And that was in 2001. And so the rest has been, so when Stormy Kromer came to our company, it was a single hat. And we've just obviously expanded the line greatly to a very, very wide assortment of hats, but also apparel and accessories and pet products and kids products and all sorts of things. And it's been an interesting transition for us because we've had to go from a strictly a manufacturer, to also being the owner of a brand and marketing it and selling and having a salesforce and all sorts of things that we didn't do as a contract manufacturer.

E

Ed Clemente 12:41

Because you're kind of more B2B, right before, now you're retail too.

G

Gina Thorsen 12:46

Yes, yes.

E

Ed Clemente 12:47

Oh, wow. That's a big, that's a big transfer, too. And I know you went to one of the more famous universities in Wisconsin, did you get a business degree or did you just know you're gonna go into the business? You went to Stevens Point, I should mention.

G

Gina Thorsen 13:00

I went to UW Stevens Point. I actually had zero intention of ever being in the family business when I graduated from high school. And my degree is in Arts Administration. And I have a Master's Degree also in Arts Administration. And I moved to Texas, and with my husband at the time, and well, he's still my husband, sorry, but as moved down there, and I worked in the nonprofit arts worlds and had a successful career, being in management of some some really growing nonprofits for about 11 years. And then, you know, the call of the UP, and the family business eventually called us back. So I've been back with the business since 2009.

E

Ed Clemente 13:44

Wow, so and which other families? I know, there's a couple of family members work there still too, right?

G

Gina Thorsen 13:51

Yeah, so my dad and I recently went through a transition. So he's sort of our Chairman now and I am the CEO, my sister is involved in the business she is our Director of Purchasing. My uncle is the Director of Operations. And over the years, there's been a number of you know, second cousins and all kinds of you know, different relations who have worked here in the business.

E

Ed Clemente 14:13

Well, when I mentioned my family business was an Italian restaurant, bar and bowling alley, all the family work there. [Exactly.] It's good and bad to work with family, it's, but usually it's good in the long run. It's, sort of getting on each other's nerves like you would any other person you work with.

G

Gina Thorsen 14:32

Yeah, there's that, but you also know that they ultimately always have your back, you know, and that there's a trust level that's always there. And yeah, it's you know, sometimes you have to navigate like, some boundaries and like, okay, it's Thanksgiving. We're not we're not going there today. Like, let's just, you know, this is a family day, not a business day. But we navigate it pretty well I think.

A

Announcer 14:58

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E

Ed Clemente 15:12

So, and with holiday seasons like what are your big sellers? I bet you those, during COVID had to sell a ton of those pet those bed pets or whatever you call them blankets. I don't know what they are.

G

Gina Thorsen 15:22

Yeah, well are actually our most popular pet product is actually a hat that we make for your dogs and your cats. So that's yeah, we call it the Critter Kromer. So that's a lot of fun, and people have fun with that. But I mean, throughout our busy season, it really is the original Stormy Kromer cap is the thing, it is our number one seller all year long. And it has, you know, we keep coming up with new colors and new reasons to get people to to add something to their collection. But at the end of the day, it's still something that people want that classic, the original, and we're still growing, you know, we're obviously well known in Michigan, and the Upper Midwest, but the further you get away from here the less well known we are and so people are always discovering us. And they sort of start there, right, they started the core, they started the reason the company exists.

E

Ed Clemente 16:18

So it's nice that you have that sort of diversified platform of still being B2B, as well as retail so you they kind of complement each other, I would guess at different seasons, right?

G

Gina Thorsen 16:28

They do. Like for instance, the the playground equipment product that we make the little awning for the playground equipment, that's obviously much more of a spring summer, you know, people start to, you know, get their backyards ready in early spring and they're like, oh, I need a new swing set, or I need a replacement cover. And so obviously, Stormy Kromer is a much more fall and winter brand. So it does help with that balance. And, and then even with Stormy Kromer, there's that part of the business is both B2B because we sell to retailers, right? So we sell wholesale too, you know, we have like 200 retailers, just in the state of Michigan alone that sell our products. So we're selling to them and then yes, we're also selling, you know, through our website, and we have a store here on site at the factory as well. I should also plug that we have a wonderful factory tour. That is most days given by my dad, which is his favorite, like semi-retirement thing to do. But we love to invite people here to really see what sewing in America, and like actual sewing production looks like. Because I think a lot of people, you know, they I've given a tour once and someone was like, Oh, I just kind of assumed you just put fabric into the hat. You know, a big machine and a hat comes out the other end right? And no, it's these mostly women sitting at sewing machines doing assembly line and cranking out hats for us. So it's we love welcoming people in to see that.

E

Ed Clemente 17:56

Yeah, and count me in. I'm going to try to get up there. [Sounds great.] Yeah. And so I didn't even ask, but I don't even know how many employees you have.

G Gina Thorsen 18:05

We have just just around 100.

E Ed Clemente 18:07

That's pretty good, though still, it's like a lot for that area. Yeah, cuz it's not a big city, right?

G Gina Thorsen 18:13

It's about 5000 people in Ironwood, maybe 12,000 people in the county. So yeah, it's a it's a small area. It's tough.

E Ed Clemente 18:23

And you're right on the river, because the across the river is with Wisconsin, right?

G Gina Thorsen 18:28

Yep. Hurley, Wisconsin is right across the border and I'd say you know, a good good percentage of our employees live in Wisconsin. So it's, you know, for us, we deal with the border, like every day, so it's not a, we don't even really think about it, right? It's all it's like one big community here.

E Ed Clemente 18:44

Yeah, I live close to Ohio, it's the same way. So is there any, like future, you kind of touched on this a little bit, but is there any other kind of future trends you think, for your industry or things you guys might want to be doing in the future?

G Gina Thorsen 18:58

You know, I think maybe it's just the kind of person I am, but I'm always most, you know, seeing those challenges that are up ahead, that we're gonna have to, you know, negotiate and, you know, manufacturing apparel in America is a tough business, right? It's, a, I'm gonna guess that most of what you might be wearing is not made in America. And, you know, it's, and there's, there's a reason for that, it's tough. So with with changes in inflation and the supply chain, and just the way the world is changing, you know, we're constantly thinking about how do we overcome those challenges and, and keep doing what we're doing and providing the value to our customers that's going to help them to understand why they're going to spend 30% more for a coat than they would at something they can get at a big box store that's, you know, been imported in like gigantic quantities, right? And so we're, we're really just continuing to think about where we can innovat. Where we can find those products that make sense to be made in

America that people are going to be willing to pull up their credit card for, and make those purchases. And one of the things we say around here is that we trust our history. Well, we've been doing this since 1958. And we've changed a million times how we've done it since then and we'll just keep doing that. We will obviously continue to expand the Stormy Kromer products that we offer. And one of the things we've been doing over the last several years is that actually Stormy Kromer, as a percentage of our overall business has really grown, and that's been intentional. Where we've, we have a lot less of that B2B contract work than we used to have and that's mainly because with Stormy Kromer, we control our destiny. And we had way too many other big customers that we were doing contract work for, give us a call and say, you know, we're taking that sewing to Mexico, I'm really sorry, but but you're losing this contract. Or, you know, this is going overseas because we have to save money and you can't beat our meet our prices. So with Stormy Kromer, we feel like that gives us as a company the most ownership over our future and we look forward to continuing to expand and introducing more people to our brand.

E

Ed Clemente 21:14

You know, I just wish I didn't have time to do a lot of research on you, but I love this story. And I used to be the President of a Chamber of Commerce. I used to work with a lot of small businesses in my area too. And I just, I loved Mom and Pop stories anyway. So you guys are a great story. Before, I've just two more questions. One one is, actually because you've had a really interesting path because you are in the arts world, what advice would you give your 17 year old self again, before us went to go discover Stevens Point, beer point beer went there? What else? What advice would you go back and give yourself today?

G

Gina Thorsen 21:56

So I was one of those kids that was very focused, and like, this is my path. And I'm not deviating from it, right? Which was great, but I think you have to make room for the opportunities, you know, that come up that maybe weren't on your path. And there was a few things that I like, I wish I would have done a semester abroad in college. Like, that's one of my biggest regrets. And I was like, no, I'm doing this in four years, that'll cost me a semester. And, you know, so things like that, that you look for opportunities, that may have not been the way you've laid them out. And I think the other big piece of advice, I had the opportunity to be able to progress in my career pretty quickly, even when I was pretty young. And I think young people sometimes are intimidated by people with seniority, which should absolutely be respected, but it doesn't mean that as a new face around on the table that you don't have really valuable things to contribute and, and a different perspective. So just having that competence and ability to, to put your ideas on the table no matter who's who's sitting around it.

E

Ed Clemente 23:06

I think I was like in my mid 30s before I really had confidence, you know, even though I did a lot of stuff, all of a sudden, something triggered, and I said, Oh, that idea is a good idea?



G Gina Thorsen 23:17
Yeah, like, oh, I belong at this table? Okay, great. Sounds good.

E Ed Clemente 23:22
Yeah, no, I've had that experience. Your last question, actually I don't know, you might not want to give away any secret spots. But what is your favorite thing to do in Michigan or favorite spot you'd like to go?

G Gina Thorsen 23:38
Definitely, well, there's two wonderful beaches on Lake Superior here and so it's a little hard to pick but I think I would pick Black River Harbor which is north of Ironwood. It's just it's like one of those places that I could just sit on that beach for hours. And it's just so peaceful, it's so beautiful. To hear those Lake Superior waves hitting the breakwater and just kind of see that expanse. It just makes my heart happy every time I go there so that that would have to be my place. [You said two.] The other one is Little Girls Point which is also north of Ironwood, it's a very different beach. So they're both really wonderful, but if I had to pick one, I would say Black River Harbor.

E Ed Clemente 24:22
You can go to both still.

G Gina Thorsen 24:24
They're both wonderful.

E Ed Clemente 24:26
Yeah, you didn't this isn't they're not listening right now so they don't know which one you picked? But yeah, no, but once again, I want to thank you again. Gina Thorson with Jacquart, right. Or they say wrong again. Yes, Fabric Products and home of Stormy Kromer. You're the CEO and Co-owner. And thank you very much, you're a real pleasure to talk to you seem like a lot of fun and keep up the good work there and let us know if the MEDC can help you out in any way.

G Gina Thorsen 24:54
Sounds great. And thank you so much.

E Ed Clemente 24:56



Thank you for taking time to do this.



Gina Thorsen 24:58

Absolutely.



Announcer 25:09

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