

SUM STORYTELLING SERIES: PHILADELPHIA

Buddha Babe

The more he drooled, the more she searched for the perfect bib. But Tina Spence's four-month-old son wasn't the easiest to shop for.

Vinyl bibs made him break out in a rash. Other designs were too flimsy to catch and hold whatever gravity pulled from his mouth.

One day she took a dive down the rabbit hole of talent on Etsy.com and found inspiration in some of the bib artisans on that site. Shortly after, she picked up the phone, placed some orders with local fabric providers, and devoted herself to instructional sewing videos on YouTube.

That's how Buddha Babe, the Philadelphia-based apparel design studio, was born in 2014. "I started at it on April 1," remembered Spence. "By Christmas I was gifting all my cousins and friends that had droolers."

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Spence has experienced all the highs and lows of being a small-batch manufacturer. In 2016 Buddha Babe's profits peaked. She was doing so well she hired two seamstresses, an operations manager, and took on a few interns from Drexel University to help with the load.

But a year later, both seamstresses became pregnant at the same time, and left. Her operations manager left too. Those Drexel interns graduated college. She tried to run everything on her own again, but operating costs started creeping upward as she struggled to meet the demands of her clients.

So Spence did something entrepreneurs might be loath to do: she moved out of her studio and back into Made Institute, the Philadelphia fashion incubator that helped her get started.

Rachel Ford, director of Made Institute, supported the decision. "She's a business owner that knows exactly what she needs and when she needs it," said Ford. Returning to an environment lush with creative energy helped her reassess what she wanted as a maker.

The Urban Manufacturing Alliance's *State of Urban Manufacturing* research in Philadelphia found that the vast majority of small-scale manufacturers in that city

[want to grow their operations](#) over the next two years. About 7 percent of the 87 businesses surveyed said they wanted to stay the same size.

But that niche is an important niche, and Spence is part of it. Her dedication to remaining a small local producer means she can communicate directly with her clients to make sure their orders are ultra-customized.

Fresh out of her return to Made Institute, she says she's in need of capital and affordable production space. "I do four [design] drafts a year, so it's seasonal, and because the money trickles back in so slowly it's like I can never really



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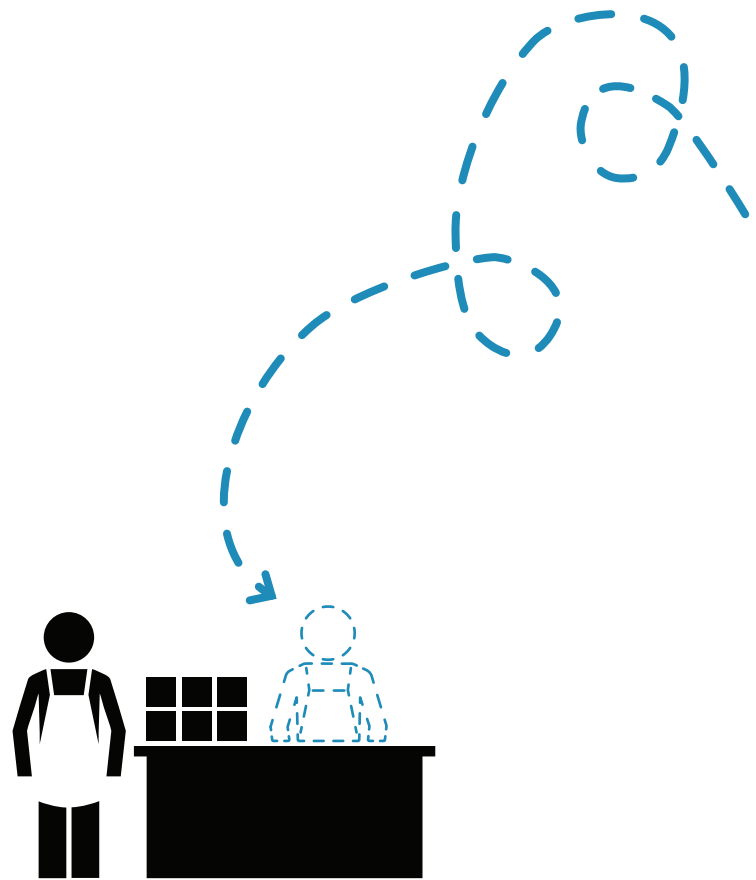
squirrel away enough to finance the coming season’s material purchase.”

But she also says she has a new clarity of vision for her business, and is open to applying for loans and other assistance for the first time since her business boomed in 2016. In a step towards that horizon, she just joined forces with a new Philadelphia fashion accelerator, Drop Culture, which will help manufacture her line and fill some of the production gaps that weighed her company down not long ago.

Those are big resources for an entrepreneur who wants to stay small-scale.

“I’m not in this to make a whole lot of money,” said Spence. “I just want to make good products for kids.”

Check out those quality products over at BuddhaBabe.us.





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This Business Profile was generously supported by the Surdna Foundation and was a part of the Urban Manufacturing Alliance's [State of Urban Manufacturing](#) report series.

