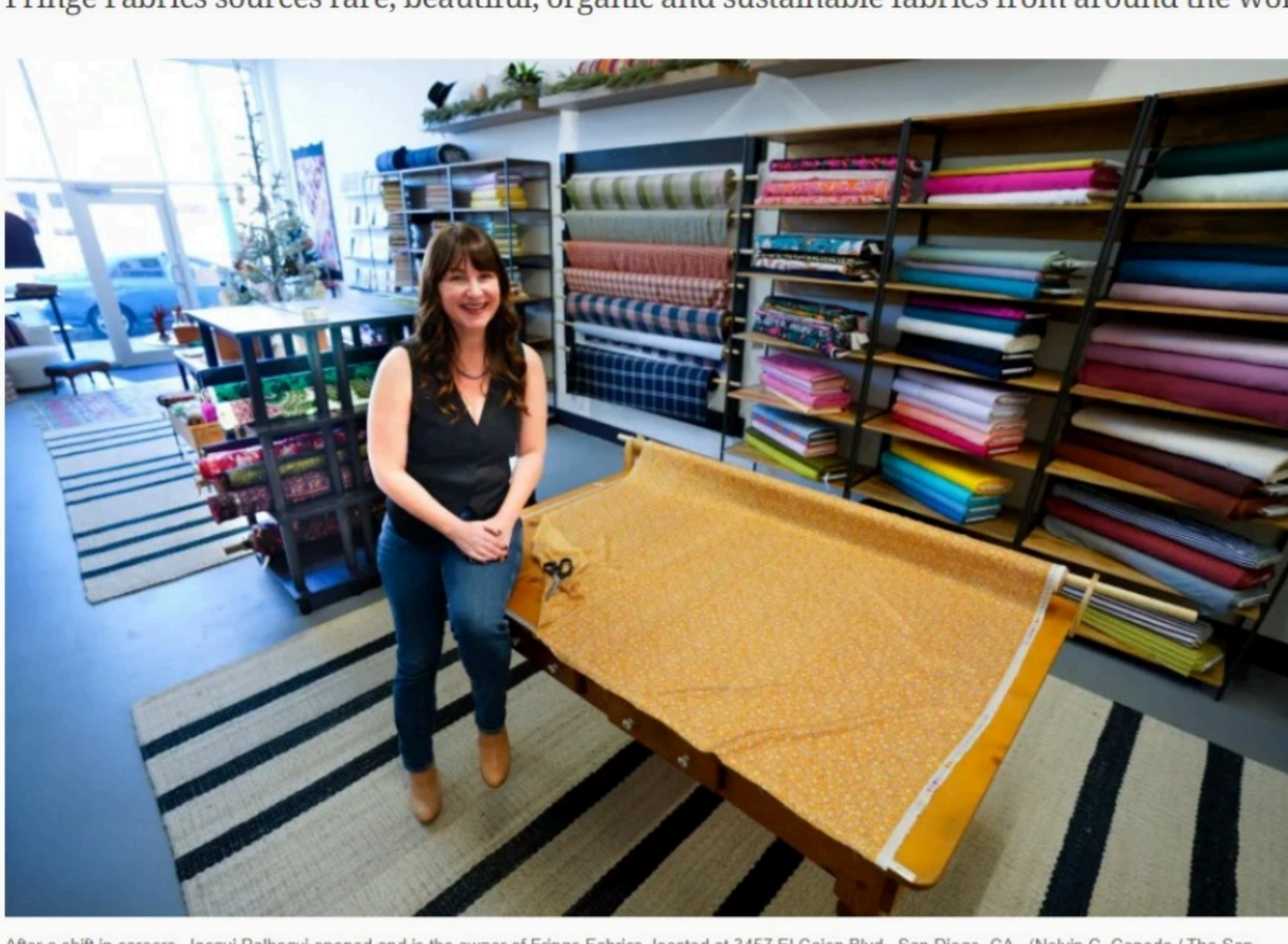


When San Diego didn't have the kind of fabric store she wanted, she created one

Fringe Fabrics sources rare, beautiful, organic and sustainable fabrics from around the world



After a shift in careers, Jacqui Palhegyi opened and is the owner of Fringe Fabrics, located at 3457 El Cajon Blvd., San Diego, CA. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By ROXANA POPESCU | roxana.popescu@suniontribune.com | The San Diego Union-Tribune
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People who are accomplished at sewing, known as sewists (important note: never sewers), have this superpower: If they want something, they can make it. Not from thin air, but from thin, middling and thick textiles held together by thread and the artisan's own resolve to turn an idea, a desire, a need, into material substance.

Jacqui Palhegyi discovered this as a girl, when her mother taught her to sew. She made patchwork quilts and clothes for her dolls. In her 20s, she got interested in sustainable and ethical fashion.

"I've been

obsessed with fabric ever since," she said.

This year

Palhegyi, now 42, did it again.

When San

Diego didn't have the kind fabric store she wanted, she created one. Now she runs

Fringe

Fabrics, a North Park fabric shop that specializes in sustainable and organic apparel textiles.

She had noticed that San Diego has a wealth of quilting and yarn shops, but most in her niche — apparel fabric — had closed down before and during the pandemic. It left a void. To find fabric shops that stocked what her sewing projects required, she had to travel to Los Angeles or farther.

Travel, not buy online, because touch and sight are vital when it comes to buying fabric. That is her No. 1 piece of advice for fabric shoppers. Go in person.

"The tactile experience of shopping for fabric is really important," she said. "I think that goes for clothing as well. Being able to look at the construction, feel the heft, feel the weight. Look at how it drapes. Hold it up to your face. See if the colors work for you. All those things that you really can't get with an online shopping experience."

So she decided to piece together what she was looking for. Fringe Fabrics opened in North Park, at 3457 El Cajon Blvd., this summer.

Here are three things to know about Palhegyi and Fringe Fabrics.

1. This is her third career. Before Fringe Fabrics, she was an English teacher, and then she worked in tech

"I have always been a pretty multidisciplinary person," she said. "I went to college, changed my major several times, settled on English, and then became an English teacher for a while."

But teaching, she felt, was a little bit constricting. For a decade she did communications and content design for tech companies.

"I really enjoyed (that) and I learned a ton," she said. "I learned skills that made this business possible."

But again, something was missing.

"I just felt like I wanted to have more creative agency and just be able to be involved in more aspects of any given business," she said. "When you're in a big company, you often get siloed."

Owning a small business "is the exact opposite. I'm doing literally everything," she said. It's hard. It's exhausting. But now, finally, she feels satisfied.

2. Sourcing is a puzzle

"We carry fabric that nobody else in San Diego does now. There are certain brands that people really want," she said.

One brand she stocks, Merchant & Mills, brings "an old-world vibe to an audience that craves it (e.g., people with otherwise fast-paced lives who want to slow down and craft)." The brand "has developed a bit of a cult following in the sewing world, and for good reason. Their fabric quality is impeccable" and the color options are "earthy while remaining on-trend."

Another, Fableism Supply Co., is a family owned and operated manufacturer that makes 100 percent cotton textiles for various uses.

"I think we're like a hub south of LA for that kind of stuff," Palhegyi said. "A hub for high quality apparel fabric."

She also sells designer Italian fabrics that are hard to find locally.

"It was pretty easy to get those wholesale relationships going by telling them about who we are as a business and kind of giving that elevator pitch," she added.

Palhegyi keeps thinking about ethics and sustainability, not just in terms of materials and the labor practices that go into how a fabric is made, but what's involved in getting it to her store.

"There's so many different factors that make something sustainable," she said. Something made locally, with natural, organic and biodegradable fiber, with the smallest possible carbon footprint, is most sustainable. "That said, it can be hard to source fabric that checks all of those boxes, so looking for certain certifications is your next best bet."

To shop more ethically, look for deadstock, or surplus material from textile mills and clothing production studios. These three labels are also a good sign: GOTS, which indicates fibers are organic; Oeko-Tex, which means testing has proven a textile or leather product is safe for humans and the environment, and BCI certified, which speaks to the quality of the cotton. BCI stands for Better Cotton Initiative.

Palhegyi thinks about sustainability "a lot because, as much as I like to provide these high quality, beautiful, organic fabrics, a lot of them are shipped from around the world. Is that really sustainable, if everything is imported? What is the carbon footprint there? I'd love to source more from California, and I'd love to source more locally."

She mentioned a California nonprofit called [Fibershed](#) that is developing a "farm to fabric" ecosystem in this state. Another program, by the [California Product Stewardship Council](#), has a "textile recovery" pilot that cuts fabric waste and instead recycles and reuses old fabric, turning it into new yarn that gets made into new clothes, all within Los Angeles.

3. Special costs more

Palhegyi's fabrics are special. With few exceptions, like some knit recycled polyesters that give those fabrics a particular look and feel, she stocks natural fibers, including cotton, linen, silk and wool. She also carries viscose, a semi-synthetic material that uses wood pulp — but in that case, she sources most of it from an ethical brand rather than from less eco-friendly generic brands.

Special can cost more. Basic cottons at Fringe Fabric cost \$7 to \$16 a yard. For designer Italian wools and silks, the price leaps to as much as \$50 per yard. Joanne sells a polyester blend for \$5 or a red and green cotton gingham discounted to \$4 a yard. Still, Joanne — and not Fringe Fabrics — has the pricier option: a 100 percent polyester, \$70 per yard, very wedding white beaded floral mesh.

She thinks about how to be inclusive and give people interested in making clothes access to high quality and sustainable fabrics, and how to balance what she needs to charge given rent and other costs, and what people can afford given how expensive it is to live in this region.

4. What's hard and what's rewarding about running a business

Knowing when to ask for help. Knowing who to ask for help. Both are hurdles she's still clearing.

She had worked in tech and felt comfortable making the store's website, but eventually she realized outsourcing makes much more sense.

"Finally I was like, I just need to reach out to an expert and have them help me. And so I did. I reached out to a consultant that specializes in fabric stores. They were super niche and they were like, 'I'd love to show you how to do this' and it saved me so much time. So much time."

To know when to ask for help, you have to first know yourself. What are your strengths and weaknesses? That kind of introspection also led her to hire someone on the finance side, to help with projections and accounting.

The next thing she's striving to answer is the "It Question" of every small business when it hits a certain stage.

"How to scale? Right now, I want to grow this business, so how do I scale? How do I scale sustainably? Without reverting myself out and without overextending the business?" Right now it's just her in the shop, but she plans to hire a part-time helper in 2025.

The best part of starting a small business has been in the confidence department, Palhegyi said.

"I think from a self-confidence perspective, it's been very validating to know that, hey, I (hoped) that this thing would work. It is kind of like that, I had a dream. I spent a long time wondering, is this crazy, should I really do this? Do I really have it in me? And to kind of have that validated? Yeah. I'm extremely proud of that. It helped me learn what I'm capable of, which is cool."

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