

An American Dream

Lucy's Tailor, a little bit of the Old World right here

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

If you had asked Lucia Camarda, owner of Lucy's Tailor in the Branford Theater building, about any special plans for the holidays, she'd probably point to the hundreds of garments — in varying degrees of alteration — that crowded the 1,000-square-foot space on South Main Street in Branford.

A shrug of her petite shoulders seems to ask: When would I have the time?

"I opened in July and the first week 40 people came through the door," says Camarda, 50, in her high-pitched Italian-accented English as she bustles from garment to garment, chalking the hem on a pair of men's trousers, clucking her tongue at the underlining of a dress, basting the sleeve of a blouse. The bell above the door rings merrily. Another customer walks into her brightly lit shop.

"Lucy is top-notch," says Leigh Czech of

Branford, setting a bag of clothes on the counter—Lucy's Tailor also does dry cleaning and shoe repair—and asking Camarda's opinion on the length of her pants. "The way she remakes anything I give her, it's like I have my own custom designer." Czech, who's had Camarda mending, hemming, and otherwise tailoring her clothes for years, says she's not alone. "She has quite a following, people who are willing to drive a good distance, even just to have something altered."

Traditional tailors are getting scarcer. So when people discover the Italian-born seamstress Camarda, who honed her craft back in the old country, they keep track of her. And it's not only longtime clients like Czech. "Every day it seems like there's a new customer," says the diminutive Camarda, as she rushes away to pick up the ringing phone.

Growing up in Naples, Italy, Camarda learned that tailoring is a labor-intensive trade. At an early age, her mother sent her to a convent—"a sort of day care," she says—where the nuns taught her how to sew, embroider, and knit. Her feet couldn't reach

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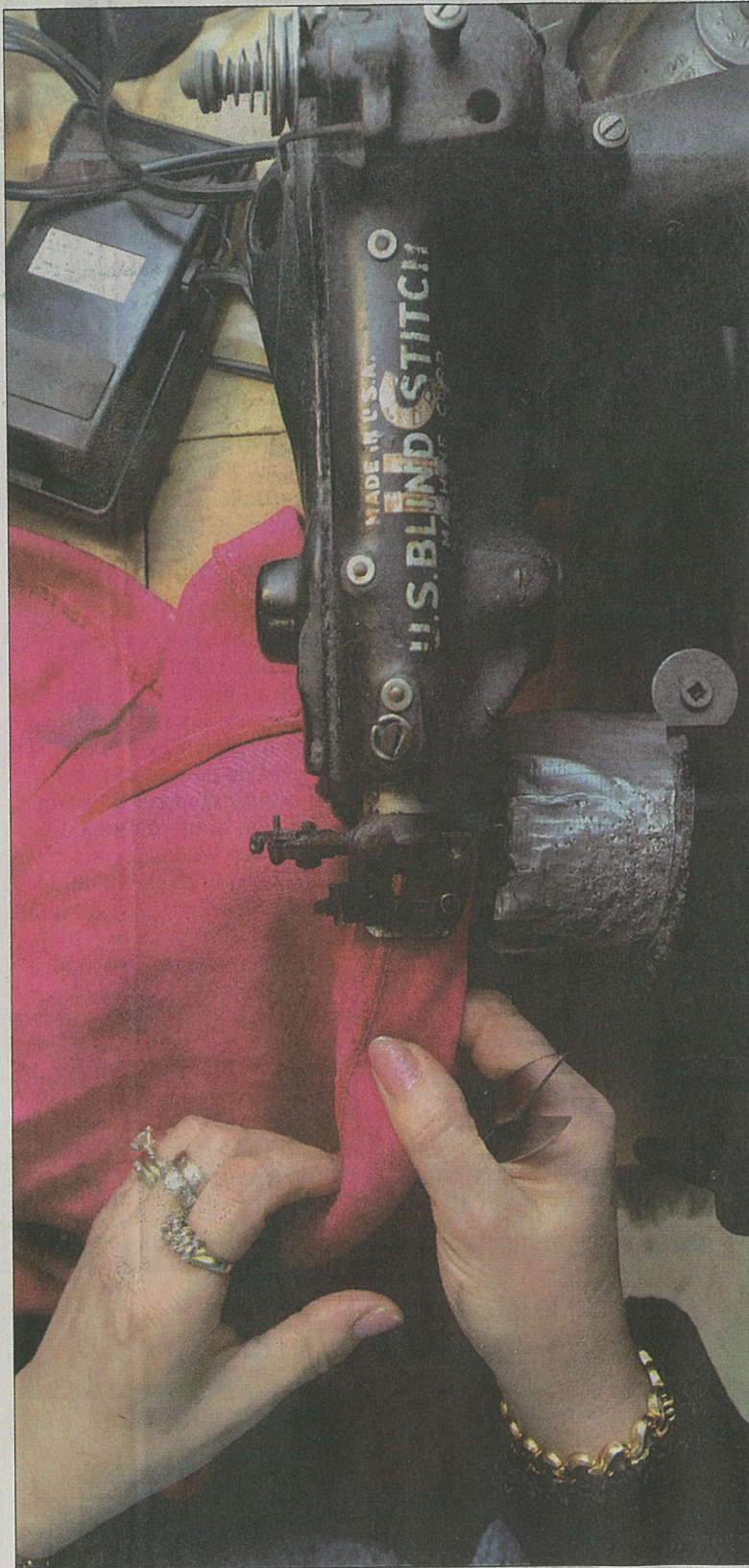


Photo by Arnold Gold

Lucia Camarda fixes a hole in a pair of pants at Lucy's Tailor on 23 South Main St. in Branford. Lucia Camarda uses a blind stitcher to hem a dress.

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reach the pedal-operated sewing machine so she just sat on the edge of her seat. She didn't mind. She was, quite literally, hooked. "From the beginning, I dreamed of being a seamstress, of making clothes," she says.

As it turned out, Camarda has been able to stitch together her dream with a willingness to work hard, a saintly patience essential for the hours of intricate craftsmanship required of her trade—and what's known in the tailoring business as "the gift." It's someone who can visualize a finished product, understand the characteristics of different fabrics, and form a pattern in her head to figure out the steps to create, or fix, it. And not everyone has it. Just like some people can paint and some can't, some people can sew and others can't, she says.

Her mother couldn't afford a sewing machine, so 8-year-old Camarda used "the gift" to hand-sew a dress for her, then made clothes for her nine younger brothers and sisters. And ever since she's arrived in New Haven in 1977—she married an Italian house painter already living here—she's parlayed her singular talent into a step-by-step journey that reads like a realization of the American dream.

In her early years, she found employment in factories producing pocketbooks, pajamas, and bathing suits. In each job, she says, "it ended up I was paid the most because I could do things, like make samples, that nobody else could do." But she never wanted a promotion that would take her away from her craft. "I just wanted to sew," she said.

Little by little, she saved enough money to buy herself a sewing machine. Word spread that she could mend a buttonhole or add a zipper. Others needed clothing altered or ready-made garments restyled. Once she got home from her job and prepared dinner for her two kids, she'd toil at her sewing machine until midnight. Soon she was taking on tailoring jobs from various dry cleaners on the shoreline.



Photo by Arnold Gold

Lucia, "Lucy" Camarda begins to hem a dress at Lucy Tailors on 23 South Main St. in Branford.

Along the way there were struggles, Camarda acknowledges, but each time, it seemed, she got a break. When the factory at which she had worked for 23 years closed, one of the dry cleaners that she'd been moonlighting for offered her a position after alterations. Then her daughter had a serious accident. By then, Camarda had two grandchildren. Because they valued her work so highly, the owner let her bring

them to the shop so she could keep an eye on them.

All along, Camarda had dreamed of owning her own business. When she learned, five years later, that her grandchildren could no longer spend their afternoons at the dry cleaners because of insurance concerns, "it was the moment," she says, as the two youngsters play in the homey waiting area. She had built up a sizeable clientele. She could afford

to buy the space on South Main Street. Since then, she hasn't looked back.

And the bell above the door to her shop hasn't stopped clanging. "I enjoy tailoring so much," says Camarda. "It's not just knowing how to sew, but knowing what a certain shape needs to make an item of clothing theirs." If it feels comfortable and attractive and looks like it was made for that person, she adds, "that's when I know I accomplished what I set out to do."

It's that high standard that has her business thriving in a dismal economy. Just letting out a pair of pants or bringing in the waistline of a dress can add years to its wearing life; because Camarda prides herself on budget-saving prices—there are never any hidden or surprise fees—her customers usually come out saving far more than they anticipated. It's the same for those who bring her clothing other people couldn't alter or altered poorly.

That's another reason, according to Camarda, that she could work 90 hours a week if she wanted to. Someone might have 30 or 40 years of experience in tailoring, but when they look at a sewing problem, they can't see the solutions she can see.

Not to say she won't burn the midnight oil for her customers. On Christmas Eve, a woman from Virginia will drop off a wedding gown that she bought at April Rose Designs in Guilford. Camarda will fix it that night and the woman will pick it up on Christmas Day for a ceremony that weekend.

She'll do the job at her East Haven home, on one of the 15 sewing machines she now owns. When reminded that her mother couldn't afford even one, Camarda shrugs. "You set goals in your life, you work hard, you can achieve those goals." Whereupon, with one glance at her grandchildren, she huerries back to finish basting that sleeve.

Editor's note: Lucy's Tailor is located at 23 South Main Street, Branford; phone: 203-315-6666.