

CUSTOM COLLABORATIVE

TRAINING | INCUBATOR | COOPERATIVE

ANNUAL REPORT 2018



For Custom Collaborative (CC), 2018 was a time of exponential growth across all areas of our organization. We continue to realize the many facets of CC's mission, which is "to serve women from low-income and immigrant communities with training and ongoing supports that equip them to achieve viable livelihoods in the women's fashion industry as designers, fashion entrepreneurs, pattern makers, and seamstresses who create and sell high-quality clothing and accessories"; and of our vision: "CC envisions a global women's apparel industry in which garment makers are fairly compensated for their labor and consumers have access to well-made, sustainably sourced clothes that fit and affirm all bodies."

CC pursues a three-part business model: (1) Our Training Institute continues its high level of success in placing graduates seeking employment and in offering ongoing professional supports, including intensive coaching, to those pursuing entrepreneurship (many graduates elect to do both). (2) Our Business Incubator, founded in late 2017, really soared in 2018. With leadership from two of our graduates, we completed our first product development cycle—including design, fabric selection, production, and merchandising—for an Afro-Futurism collection inspired by the film "Black Panther." The collection, which debuted at our Welcome to Wakanda Fashion Show in June, incorporates the traditional colors and lush textures of African materials with ultramodern shapes and silhouettes.

Late in the year, our manufacturing side got a tremendous boost when a community-based organization in East Harlem offered to make available to us, long term and free of charge, 1,100 square feet of space suitable for light manufacturing. Heretofore we have had to turn away some of the contract work offered to us due to lack of space. This additional space, however, will go a very long way toward solving this problem. It will also enable the long-anticipated launch of the third part of our business model: (3) Fashion That Works (FTW), a employee-owned cooperative open to CC's Training Institute graduates and qualified others, where women's empowerment is a fashion priority.



Recently, one of our students, an immigrant and a survivor of domestic violence, told us that although she is often anxious as she copes with the memories of her experience, her involvement with CC makes her feel hopeful and happy as she begins each day. We hope that you, as a supporter of CC, share our joy at feedback like this. We are delighted to share the following news with you and we welcome your feedback at info@customcollaborative.org or 212-804-7353.

2018 HIGHLIGHTS

In January, CC partners with other NYC Fair Trade Coalition members to develop communal economic development project with a dedicated retail operation (currently expressed as pop-up shops) for our participants selling handmade products. Through pop-up shop locations strategically selected with our partners, we will offer participants at least 10 high-profile selling opportunities each year, along with intensive individual coaching in business finance, product development, and marketing. We aim to aggregate data from our own and allied organizations to determine the economic impact of our work on the micro-communities in which we operate.

CC launches its volunteer program in February to get people involved with us onsite. (Designer Rinat Brodach now volunteers with our Training Institute one day per week as a teacher's assistant!) CC also teams up with curator and cultural historian Michelle Black Smith to hold a History of Modern Fashion Workshop focusing on African textiles and styles. In addition, we partner with Brooklyn Fashion and Design Accelerator (BF+DA) and NYC's High School of Fashion Industries to lead a discussion for students on careers in fashion. And, in an article on "conscious consumerism," Colliers International Knowledge Leader singles out CC as a "favorite brand."

In March, CC's Training Institute graduates design an accessory collection inspired by the hit film "Black Panther." Also in March MBA students from New York Institute of Technology partner with CC's students to offer them assistance in marketing and website design. We introduce "First Friday Fabric Drop Off" at our studio, to welcome our neighbors, engage them in sustainability, and upcycle any unused textiles they might be able to donate.

April: BF+DA invites CC to participate, along with other industry innovators, in the annual Fashion Revolution Week, a global event to advance greater transparency in fashion supply chains.

May: A February 2017 graduate of our Training Institute expands her line from custom to ready-to-wear.



June: CC joins with NYC's Parks Department and ImageNation for the "Black Panther"-inspired Welcome to Wakanda Fashion Show, where an audience of 1,000+ views our new accessory collection (referenced in March), and our graduate's ready-to-wear collection (referenced in May.) Also in June, we Join with Mara Hoffman, Women's Prison Association, and professionals from over a dozen leading fashion businesses to develop more living-wage pathways for formerly incarcerated and systems-involved women.

An invaluable CC Advisor (who also serves as senior coordinator of fabric systems and sustainability at Lafayette 148) is married in July wearing a stunning lace-bedecked gown (pictured at left) designed during the spring by a CC graduate.

On a balmy evening in August CC welcomed friends and special guests to our studios in The Riverside Church complex for a Sip and Sew event. We had great fun socializing as participants learned to create a chic little pouch—the perfect accessory!

In September (and again in November), CC places graduates in internships at standout women-owned fashion businesses, among them, Jussara Lee, best known for her fabulous Greenwich Village boutique. Also in September, Nest Artisan Guild, a global nonprofit that advances the interests of handworkers in more than 100 countries, completes a strategic growth assessment process for CC.

Hiss, a woman-led NYC-based film production company, joins us in creating a documentary short film, "Fashion Is Love" (available on our website), dedicated to our women and their fashions, which premieres in October. The film generates an over-the-top response from a sold-out room of supporters and fashion industry insiders at Chase Contemporary Art Gallery, in Chelsea; highlights included a post-screening talkback with a panel of fashion experts. Also in October, CC Executive Director Ngozi Okaro speaks at Fashion Institute of Technology during a sustainable fashion presentation and panel hosted by NYC Fair Trade Coalition.



In November, Ngozi speaks at Social Venture Circle's annual conference to an audience of 400 social entrepreneurs. Also in November, CC launches its blog with a story on one of our students, holds the first meeting of its organization-wide strategic planning process, and is featured in Fashion Manuscript magazine.

Wrapping up the year in December we hold the last of our 10 magical pop-up shops, one of them at our Holiday Open House at our base in The Riverside Church. (Thank you to Kerry James, chair of CC Circle, for joining us from Boston!) Also in December, we also got great media coverage: an in-depth interview with our own Ngozi Okaro in Remake Magazine.