

**Tape Recording:**

Yelena Crosston's path to Greenville started in the former Soviet Union and featured stops in Italy, Rhode Island, Boston, and Toronto. She now designs and creates garments at her made-to-order boutique Yelena Exclusive Atelier in the Village of West Greenville.

of West Greenville, in a storefront space that she leases from one of the remaining local textile manufacturers, Crosston has spent her entire working life creating unique clothing. The *atelier* has the vibe of a turn-of-the-century Victorian parlour—an antique standing mirror, a vintage 1914 cabinet that holds fabric swatches, and an overstuffed couch for taking a cup of tea.

Growing up in Tambov, a provincial town five hours south of Moscow, Crosston always had “a passion for creating fashion.” Her childhood is filled with memories of a big, happy, close-knit family in the small town that she recalls, “was very similar to Greenville. We had ballet, culture, and museums in addition to the traditional military bases and factories.” Her grandmother, an excellent seamstress, provided a deep education in fabrics, sewing, and patterns, and she remembers, “infused everything she taught me with love.” Required to wear a somber school uniform of dark brown and navy blue, Crosston remembers tweaking the white lace cuffs in her first attempts at defining her personal style.

Ballroom dancing provided the impetus for a foray into costume-making. Both she and her older sister were serious competitors, wearing extravagant costumes embellished with beading, appliqué, and sequins they sent for from Moscow. While attending college in Tambov, Crosston studied sewing, but had no idea it would become her career. In fact, sitting at the old-fashioned, foot-pedaled Singer sewing machine in class, under the auspices of a miserable teacher, she broke down and cried, vowing, “I’ll never do that again.” However, after sticking it out, she graduated with a sewing degree, specializing in patternmaking.

Designing first for a boutique associated with her former college, she went on to open her own shop, creating women’s wear for the town’s wealthiest citizens, as well as making costumes for touring showgirls who took her designs all over Europe. (*continued on page 66*)

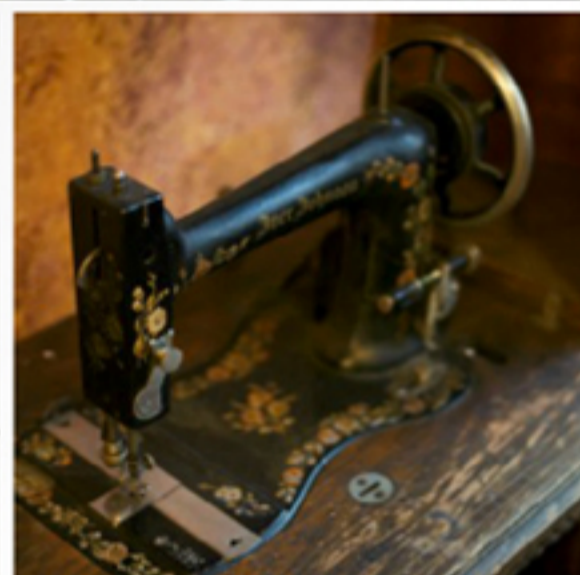
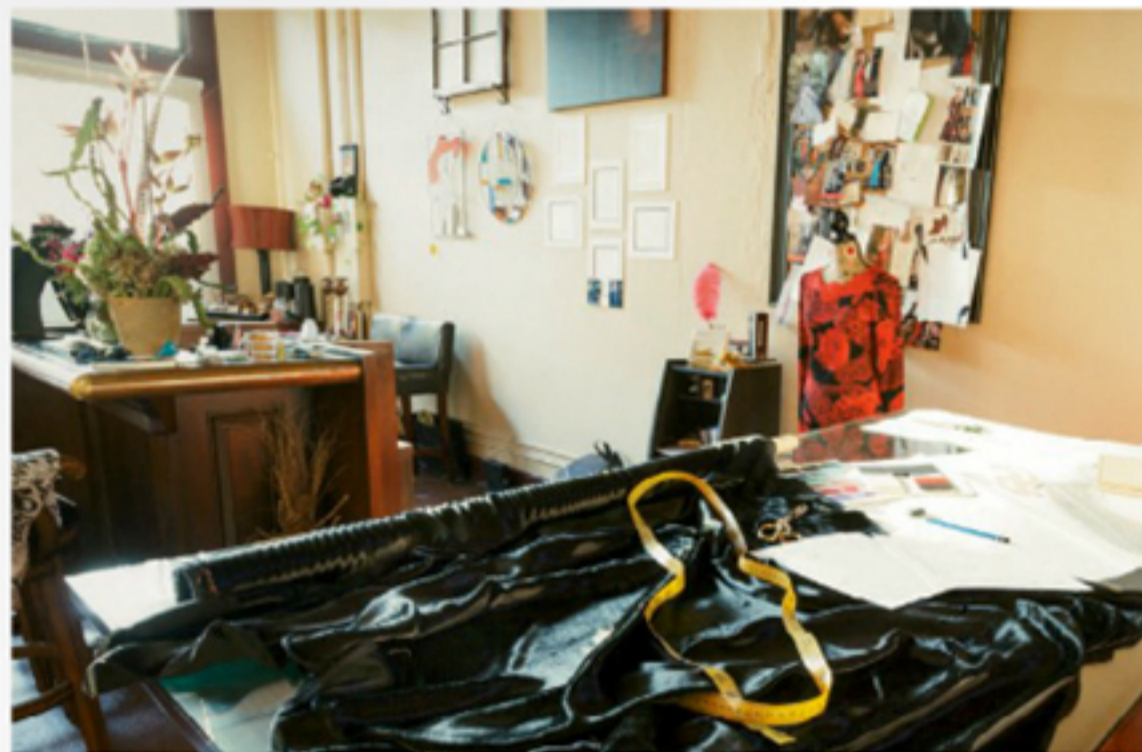
Designing Woman

Yelena Crosston brings an international flair to her custom clothing designs

/by Ruta Fox // photography by Eli & Julie Warren

Life holds many surprises. The little girl walking to school in the former Soviet Union wearing a drab uniform on a snowy day in 1985 is light years away from the sophisticated dress designer who is now happily working in her sunshine-flooded *atelier* in Greenville.

Yelena Crosston, owner of Yelena Exclusive Atelier, is the city’s own version of a French *couturier*—someone who makes original garments-to-order for private clients. Nestled in the Village




In one of many strokes of luck, she reconnected with a man whom she met at college, and who eventually would become her husband. He was the first American to visit Tambov through a student exchange program from his college in Vermont. They married, moved to the United States, and in a whirlwind of activity, she found herself pregnant, unable to speak English, and living in Providence, Rhode Island, then moving to Boston. In Boston, she took a job at a bridal shop doing alterations since no English was required—even though it was quite a step down from being a designer. But, sure enough, in an *All About Eve* Hollywood movie moment, a wedding dress for a client was unobtainable at the last minute, so they asked Crosston to step in and make the entire gown to meet the impending deadline.

After relocating to Toronto, Yelena opened another boutique. Then in 2005, her husband was offered a professorship at Clemson University. “My expectations for opening a shop in Greenville weren’t so high, because people were not used to having garments made to order here. They did not have much experience with *couture*. But my first year ended up being very successful.”

Her design influences include fashion superstars Givenchy, Gianni Versace, and Oscar de la Renta. Living legend, designer Carolina Herrera is also a much-admired favorite. She says, “I was lucky to have spent a lot of time in Italy, as my sister lived there for nine years. I am so inspired by the fabrics, the shops, and the resources for fashion there. Fabrics have a certain quality; they tell you how to work with them, and they have a personality unto themselves.”

As for working with clients, Crosston says, “When a person comes to me, I have to understand what their needs are. Comfort? Classic evening beauty? A chic business suit?

I say I can create everything from shy elegance to extravagantly sexy. I have done a few fashion shows at the Poinsett Club for charity, which really lets me showcase my work. Each one of my designs is unique, and I cut all my custom patterns by hand. From concept to fittings to finish, my name is on the dress, so it has to be perfect. I take a lot of pride in my work, including all the details, inside and out.”

Crosston is now single, and a proud U.S. citizen with a 16-year-old daughter, who ironically “is a tomboy and not so much into clothes. But for school dances, she is happy that I can design her a one-of-a-kind dress.” As for future plans, she is optimistic about growing the business. “I would love to create an elegant but versatile line of day-to-night dresses, skirts, and tops—high-quality garments designed and made in Greenville.” 

Yelena Exclusive Atelier
12-B Lois Avenue, Greenville
(864) 506-1011, yelenaexclusive.com
Mon-Fri, 10:30am-5pm, or by appointment
Prices range from \$500 to \$3,000, and up

Thread & Wine:

Crosston has helped create an event called the **Black Velvet Affair**, which will take place at Midtown Artery in the Village on **December 4** to benefit the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. The elegant evening will feature Champagne, hors d'oeuvres and jazz music to showcase fine art, jewelry, and sculpture as well as her designs. For more information, go to blackvelvetaffair.com.