

Fashionable Solutions for Special Needs
By Alice Levine

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In November 2009, Susan Kleiman felt dismayed as she dressed her 17-year-old son Ross in the white socks he had become accustomed to wearing. Ross was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy at an early age, and unfortunately, had few choices with his clothing.

As a mom of a son with special needs, Susan first focused on finding socks that were not neutral and drab, offered comfort and breathability, and could be worn under Ross's braces. When Susan's search reached a dead end, she had a brainstorm: fun, fashionable socks for children with special needs. While Susan had a strong background in marketing and sales, she needed to embark on a research campaign to turn her dream into a reality. She spoke to other parents of children with special needs, occupational therapists and physical therapists to ensure design details and functionality would align. After partnering with a graphic designer and finding a manufacturer to produce the socks, Ross Daniel Adaptive Apparel (RDAA) was born.

Susan's enthusiasm for the product is contagious. She said, "What's so joyous about the clothes is that it makes the kids feel like they fit in. Some of their favorites include the socks with tie-dye patterns and the other design with peace signs." Susan works with United Cerebral Palsy and shows her products at several trade shows. She also works closely with the Center for Discovery in Monticello, the residential school her son attends. Ross cannot walk or talk, but his receptive language skills are good. He has a computer that helps him communicate, and as Susan emphasized, "In spite of the fact that he is physically and neurologically challenged, he's a typical teenager, in many ways."

Susan moved from socks to a clothing line, after two years of hard work and determination. Her collection includes adapted t-shirts, waterproof bandana scarves, and fun, cotton tops with magnets. Susan was particularly bothered that children had to wear baby bibs in public; she responded by developing a dignified, fashionable and waterproof clothing protector that she trademarked as ProtecTees. She has also expanded her collection to include clothing for seniors with special needs. Susan now works closely with nursing homes and assisted-living facilities, which have begun selling her clothing line.

When I asked Susan how she dealt with the initial shock of Ross's condition, she explained, "When you get lemons, you make lemonade. I moved from being distraught to being motivated. Believe me, I have my bad days, but this venture has helped me tremendously."

Perhaps Susan's greatest satisfaction is reading some of the testimonials on her websites from children, parents and caretakers. For example, one testimonial read, "Thank you for the fabulous pair of argyles, which I tried out on the equally fabulous Billy Bly. They stay put, keeping his legs warm, and the socks are not falling down into his orthopedic shoes." Susan added that the teachers at Ross's school are also very enthusiastic about her clothing collection. "Some of them will actually mention particular outfits that they feel fit the personalities of the

kids at school. We sometimes forget about the importance of caregivers and teachers, but getting them involved and excited really helps everyone,” Susan added. “I love seeing a smile on a child’s face when he or she has chosen the ProtecTee outfit that suits his or her fashion sense. It makes it all worthwhile.”

Susan is especially excited about the future of the clothing line. The competition is limited, and the response to RDAA has been very positive. “I love what I’m doing and I can’t wait to see where it goes. I am already planning to design a new collection of easy to put on and stylish shirts, pants and outerwear for kids and adults.”

For more information on Ross Daniel Adaptive Apparel, please visit their website, www.RDadaptiveapparel.com