

AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 1: EPISODE 06: SHULY AMSEL, Wig Maker. Brooklyn, New York.

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington DC

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce (Host): Welcome to "America Works," excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This America Works podcast features wigmaker Shuly Amsel, the owner and operator of Shuly's Wigs in Brooklyn, New York. Amsel started making wigs at home for women in her own Orthodox Jewish community. Over the years, the quality and creativity of her work was recognized and her business expanded. Today, her dedicated clients come from multiple backgrounds and communities and include numerous fashion designers and celebrities.

She was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by scholar, researcher, and Archie Green Fellow Candacy Taylor.

INTERVIEW

Candacy Taylor: So can you tell me about how you started your business?

Shuly Amsel: Sure. I started my business about 15 years ago, over 15 years ago, but it was really very mom and pop. It was in my kitchen and then it went into my basement when we moved and it was one customer at a time.

Candacy Taylor: Were you in Brooklyn?

Shuly Amsel: Yes. I always loved beauty and I loved hair so I went and I did a three-month summer course in the city [New York] for styling hair.

It was one-on-one by a stylist and it was not even with a certificate. So you could call me a – somebody who started this off as a hobby, maybe, but it became something that totally over-powered me, overwhelmed my life, and just sucked me in. Wigs are something--I don't know what it is--naturally, I'm a wig-wearing woman.

I started wearing wigs in 1982, my first marriage. Jewish women, when they get married, they cover their hair. It is a religious tradition; it stems from the Talmud. And what happens is when a Jewish woman gets married, her hair. I...how should we say? Her hair gets a different status. It becomes something intimate and it's only for her husband to see. So at home, the women can have very long hair and they don't have to have their hair covered. But outside, no other man should see her hair.

That doesn't mean that the Jewish-Orthodox woman wants to look dowdy and horrible, that's not at all the case, it's really about covering your hair for your husband.

Candacy Taylor: You know, where you just told us, you knew as a child, like "Eventually, I'm going to wear a wig..."

Shuly Amsel: Well, my mother wore a wig and I knew that when I get married, I'm going to wear one. At the time, like in the early 1980s, late '70s, wigs were matronly looking, they were not so fashionable. There were a lot of wigs that looked like Jackie Onassis: you know, with the poufy...the hair that was used was very poor quality. As times progressed, the hair that people are sourcing is better hair, it has more movement. It looks much more natural. We've developed a multi-directional top that you have a scalp and you can move it everywhere. So the styles are endless, you can even do an up-do, and you can go through a really fancy red carpet affair and look very, very glamorous with the wig.

Eighty percent of my business is Jewish-Orthodox women, who are wearing the wigs all day, every day and it has to be comfortable. They have to forget it's on their head. One of my ads is: "You will be noticed, not your wig." "Cause you want the total package--you don't want something looking very "wiggly" on you. So they have to forget it's on their head. You're ventilating the hair..."

Candacy Taylor: So where do you get the raw hair?

Shuly Amsel: I have sources. I have a lot of brokers who come to me, approach me -- "Shuly, I have beautiful hair." And then I check the hair; that, I do myself. I handpick the hair. And the hair that I choose, I pay for. It's more money than just buying in bulk. But that way I have a little bit more control over the quality that I'm getting.

Because the hair that I'm sourcing is high, high quality. What happens is, when the cuticles are removed from the hair, the hair dies very quickly. When hair has cuticles --- every hair has fish scales on it. And it has to be in exactly the right direction so no matting should occur, knotting. So they just take off the cuticles, which look like fish scales and then they can put the hair in any which way--upside down! But I, on the other hand, do not remove the cuticle so every hair has to be put in carefully. That means, if a woman who is ventilating my hair, if she drops the hair on the floor, she is not allowed to pick it up and put it back, because she won't know which direction it came from.

Candacy Taylor: So how many stylists do you have here working on wigs?

Shuly Amsel: Usually, it's like this: I have 2 cutters, 2 colorists, 2 stylists, sometimes I style if I have time. When I first got into wigs, I was looking to improve on the quality of the wig and to make the wig as comfortable as it could be for women to wear because we have to wear it literally every day. To wear something every day it has to be sturdy but at the same time, comfortable. And that's a very difficult thing to do.

So, you know, I like to do a lot of work in the beauty industry because I love beauty. And again, this is one side of my business; the next side is really empowering women. I sometimes have women here that come here and they're really in the dumps. I tell women, "You look good, you're going to feel good." I think beauty attracts success somehow. You know when you feel good, you're more confident and that confidence will attract success. So I'm a big proponent of that and I push that heavily.

I do want to do an amazing project with women who are going through chemo or alopecia and do an amazing editorial in a big magazine or on a TV show before and after. Show them coming out bald, and having them come out with the wig and how they can look so with it, without those old-fashioned ugly wigs.

A wig is an accessory today. It's not something that you have to wear, it's a gorgeous, amazing, accessory. It doesn't pull your hair out. And that's what I really want to let people know about. And I want to improve women's lives in that way.

END OF INTERVIEW

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: You've been listening to wigmaker Shuly Amsel, owner of Shuly's Wigs in Brooklyn, New York, who was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by scholar, researcher and Archie Green Fellow Candacy Taylor.

To hear the complete interview with Shuly Amsel, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC. Visit us at www.loc.gov