

Supreme Court faces docket full of Trump cases

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A look at how the Epstein files dogged former AG

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US LABOR MARKET

HANGING BY A THREAD



ANDRES KUDACKI, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tailor Kil Bae works inside his shop on March 27 in New York. The number of tailors and custom sewers are shrinking in the U.S.

Demand up for tailors despite decline in numbers

ANNE D'INNOCENZIO
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Hunched over a sewing machine, Kil Bae is hemming a dress inside his Manhattan tailor shop when a new customer stops by with a vintage Tommy Hilfiger jacket he wants taken in.

The modeling agent paid \$20 at a thrift store for his reversible bomber style that's plaid on one side and red on the other. He's willing to spend \$280 to have it slimmed down. Alteration requests with such a price disparity would have seemed odd a few years ago, the tailor says, but are helping to keep the bobbins bobbing at his one-man shop, 85 Custom Tailor.

Bae carefully examines the cotton jacket before moving in to pin it, circling the customer like a sculptor with a chisel. He started training as a tailor at age 17, in his native South Korea. Now 63, he's part of a shrinking breed in the U.S., where

professional sewers, dressmakers and tailors are aging out of the workforce as their services find fresh demand.

Shoppers who grew up on disposable fast fashion are enlisting tailors and seamstresses to give off-the-rack purchases a custom fit or personal flair, to revive secondhand finds or to extend the lives of their wardrobes, according to fashion industry experts. Weight-loss drugs like Zepbound and Wegovy mean more Americans are seeking adjusted waistbands, tapered sleeves and other types of resizing, Bae said.

"I recommend this job to young people because this one cannot be AI'd," Bae said, noting artificial intelligence is automating pattern making but so far can't replicate a tailor's handiwork. "Different bodies. Different shape. They cannot copy like this. If I close this door, I can go out and find another one."

But like engraving, repairing musical instruments and many other skilled trades, creating and fitting garments to individual specifications hasn't attracted enough entry-level workers over the years to replace the professionals retiring their pincushions after decades of performing their craft.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated almost two years ago there were fewer than 17,000 tailors, custom sewers and dressmakers working in business establishments nationwide, a 30% decline from a decade earlier.

Including self-employed individuals and people working in private households, the median age for all sewers, dressmakers and tailors was 54 last year, 12 years older than the median for the entire employed population, according to the bureau.

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CHARLES KRUPA, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Matthew Shifrin, founder of Bricks for the Blind, feels for specific pieces while building a Lego gum ball machine at his family's home March 20 in Newton, Mass.

Man's business brings Lego play to the visually impaired

MICHAEL CASEY
Associated Press

NEWTON, Mass. — Like a lot of young children, Matthew Shifrin loved building Lego sets. But because he was blind, Shifrin had to rely on friends and family to help him complete his creations.

That all changed when he was 13. A family friend and babysitter came over to his house in Newton, Massachusetts, and handed him a binder filled with accessible instructions for building a Middle Eastern palace. The instructions, written in Braille, allowed him to complete the set without having to rely on the brightly colored pictures that typically come with Lego sets.

"This was the first time that I was able to build a Lego set on my own," Shifrin said at his home, surrounded by sets he has built,

including a Statue of Liberty figurine and NASA's Apollo Saturn V rocket. "It was truly an amazing experience because I was completely in control of the whole building process. I knew where the pieces went and I was able to learn about the world around me."

After Shifrin's babysitter died, he wanted to honor her memory. So he set about fine-tuning the instructions the two had posted online to reach other blind builders.

Three years ago, Shifrin launched Bricks for the Blind. The 28-year-old now works with a team of 30 sighted writers and blind testers. His website makes the downloadable instructions available for free to anyone who's blind or visually impaired.

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Tailors

From 1

The income that a proficiency with needle and thread commands relative to the skills needed and the physical toll of bending over detailed work for hours likely discourages teenagers and young adults from heeding Bae’s advice, fashion industry experts said.

The mean annual wage tailors, dressmakers and custom sewers earned as of May 2024 was \$44,050 a year, compared to \$68,000 for all workers, according to BLS calculations.

“Most of fashion training is really aimed at mass production, not spending time in a shop handmaking a garment,” said Scott Carnz, the provost of LIM College, a for-profit college that offers degrees in disciplines from the business side of fashion. “The work is also tedious.”

Online job postings for tailors, dressmakers and sewers have remained fairly stable, according to Cory Stahle, an economist with the research arm of jobs site Indeed. Between February 2020 and the end of the same month this year, advertised openings decreased by roughly 2%, while postings for both marketing and software jobs declined by nearly 30%, he said.

“There is a kind of a craftsmanship ... that I think is an important piece that we can’t ignore,” Stahle, who focuses on the U.S. labor market, said.

Immigrants with and without permanent legal status, refugees and naturalized citizens have powered America’s garment industry for well over a century.



EDUARDO MUNOZ ALVAREZ, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tailor Marco Lema, 35, of Ecuador, measures a denim alteration at Nordstrom headquarters March 23 in New York.

An analysis of recent census data by the Migration Policy Institute found about 40% of tailors, dressmakers and sewers were foreign-born, according to Julia Gelatt, associate director of the nonpartisan think tank’s U.S. Immigration Policy Program. The biggest shares came from Mexico, South Korea, Vietnam and China, she said.

To address a worsening labor shortage, the fashion industry is looking to create a new generation of master tailors.

Nordstrom, North America’s largest employer of tailors and alteration specialists, teamed up with New York’s Fashion Institute

of Technology to launch a nine-week program in advanced sewing and alteration techniques.

“Customarily, tailoring has never been part of the American skill set,” said FIT instructor and Broadway costume builder Michael Harrell, who teaches the course.

The fashion institute received 200 applications for the inaugural cohort of 15 students, who started in October and received certificates of completion in February, said Jacqueline Jenkins, the executive director of the school’s Center for Continuing and Professional Studies.

The hands-on training was designed to prepare participants

to work at Nordstrom. The luxury department store chain employs 1,500 people to provide tailoring and alternations, from hemming jeans and repairing rips to fitting suits and reworking evening gowns.

Ten members of the first class were hired or are in the process of being hired, Marco Esquivel, Nordstrom’s director of alterations, said.

“We owe it to the broader industry to ensure that this is an art form that exists for years and years to come and continues to serve customers both within our walls as well as outside,” Esquivel said.

Meanwhile, other retailers are expanding their tailoring services because of demand.

Brooks Brothers, a luxury brand that has made custom men’s clothes since the 1800s, tested a similar service for women at five stores last year. This year, it expanded

bespoke women’s tailoring to 40 more stores. Prices start at \$165 for shirts and \$1,398 for suits, the company said.

Back at 85 Custom Tailor, Bae asked more than once if the customer with the Tommy Hilfiger jacket was certain he wanted to proceed with the alterations. Jonathan Reis, 33, was sure. He said he planned to wear the jacket often.

“I think I fell victim to buying cheap stuff, and then you realize it just falls apart or shrinks or it just doesn’t last long,” Reis said.

Bae has a son who’s a year older than Reis. He tried to persuade him to go into tailoring. The son used to work with computers and then opened a bagel shop.

“Young people. They just want to find a job in computers,” Bae said. “I think that’s too boring. I think this is very interesting. Every time, I am drawing in my head. I am like an artist.”

Bae trained under his older sister and brother at their custom apparel shop about 93 miles (150 kilometers) from Seoul. After five years, he moved to South Korea’s capital to work on custom orders and samples for various companies. He moved to the New York City area, where he worked as a pattern maker for Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan and other designer brands.

He opened his own shop in Connecticut in 2011, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced him to close after a decade. He reopened in his current location a year later.

He uses three different sewing machines: a basic one, another for heavy materials like denim and leather, and an overlock machine, which cuts, trims, and finishes fabric edges simultaneously.

Bae said he intends to keep working as long as his hands stay steady enough.

“I’m always learning,” he said.



EDUARDO MUNOZ ALVAREZ, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tailor Marco Lema works on a denim alteration at Nordstrom.



ANDRES KUDACKI, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tailor Kil Bae works inside his shop in New York.

Lego

From 1

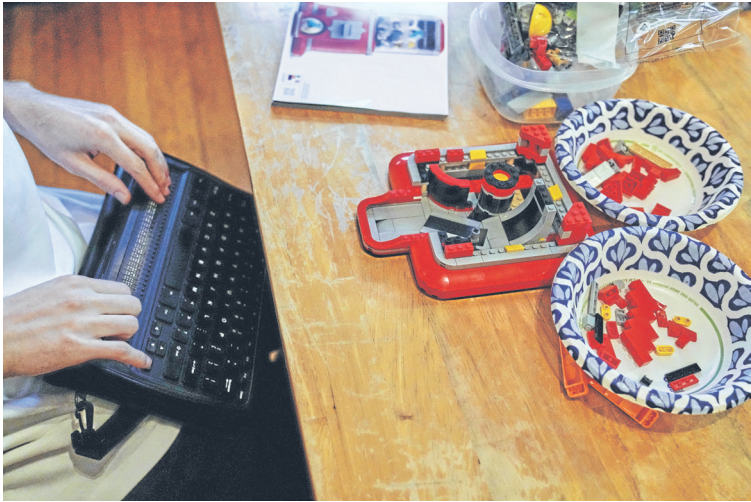
They can either print the step-by-step instructions in Braille, use Braille computers or turn to screen readers, which are software applications that convert the text into speech.

The instructions allow a blind person to build on their own, but Shifrin’s website also says a sighted person might be needed to sort Lego bricks. Otherwise, the blind builder could turn to one of several apps that identify bricks using artificial intelligence.

So far, the nonprofit has created instructions for more than 540 Lego sets, ranging from a 100-piece car to a 4,000-piece bridge. About 3,000 builders have used their instructions across the United States and as far away as Australia.

Shifrin also approached the Denmark-based Lego Group in 2017 about making their products more accessible, which inspired the company to create audio and Braille instructions for a growing number of Lego sets. That launched in 2019.

Separately, the company also introduced Lego Braille Bricks in 2020, which are available in French, English and Spanish, and feature studs on the bricks that correspond to letters, numbers and symbols. It also has introduced several characters in their



CHARLES KRUPA PHOTOS, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Matthew Shifrin, founder of Bricks for the Blind, reads from a Braille terminal while building a Lego gumball machine at his family’s home.

sets with vision loss.

Shifrin said he has gotten messages from many people who couldn’t build Lego until now. He’s heard from grandparents who are blind and say they’re now able to build with their grandkids.

Daniel Millan, who lost his sight in 2024, turned to Bricks for the Blind after a tumor crushed his optic nerves. The 31-year-old from San Diego first completed a Lego ornament set. Then on his anniversary, he completed a Lego rose set with his wife.

“Being able to do it independently, it’s freedom,” he said, adding that his sudden vision loss left him wondering about what he wouldn’t be able to do again.

But after building Lego sets,

he soon learned that “It’s not about what I can’t do anymore. It’s more about what I can do,” he said.

For Natalie Charbonneau, who is blind, the instructions have allowed her to complete sets without relying on her sighted husband. It’s also allowed her to have fun with her 5-year-old son.

“If he has questions, I have the ability to check his work or to follow along instead of saying, ‘You have to wait for your dad’ or ‘You have to ask your dad.’ It’s something that I can now do with him as well, which is empowering,” said Charbonneau, a tester for Bricks for the Blind who lives in Bellingham, Washington.



Matthew Shifrin listens to directions on his phone while building a Lego gumball machine in Newton, Mass.

Teri Turgeon, the education director for community programs at Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts — where Shifrin went as a baby — said the accessible instructions allow blind children to experience the same pleasure as their sighted peers. It also helps them visualize a wider world and develop “fine motor and tactile skills.”

“He’s created a space around innovation and accessibility that was otherwise not there prior and he’s done so with a toy that children play with every day,” she said.

Back at his house, Shifrin helped fellow blind builder Minh Ha to build a go-kart. Ha grabbed Lego bricks and elements from two bowls and began to first put

together a driver figurine.

“It’s just legs, torso, head, helmet. You’ve built this before. It’s a piece of cake. I believe in you,” Shifrin told her.

“Awesome,” she said with a smile. “All right, I’m gonna put the helmet on the head. And then ... put the legs on the body.”

She reflected on a journey that began two years ago when she built a lotus flower.

“A lot of blind people have been left out of this cultural and kind of childhood phenomenon of being able to build Lego, play with Lego,” Ha said. “There is something incredibly satisfying and also relaxing to be able to put together these very intricate, very beautiful and architecturally complex builds.”