

Specialty fabrics Review

First Winner of the IFF Innovation Award: Chameleon International

Specialty Fabrics Review | November 2010

By Lynn Keillor

Debra and Lauren Aperfine with the “magical raincoat” that created a specialty fabrics manufacturer—and the first winner of the IFF Innovation Award. Photo: Chameleon Intl.

Award

Many people talk about a dream business or a dream career. Debra Aperfine can honestly say that her business and product lines are the direct result of a dream.

One morning in 2001, Aperfine’s young daughter recounted a vivid dream about a magical raincoat that changed colors as it got wet. Intrigued (and at her daughter’s insistence), Aperfine began investigating whether such a product actually existed. Her search yielded no similar product, and questions starting with “What if ...” kept coming back. “And by this time, it wasn’t just my daughter who wanted this raincoat; I had her brother, her two sisters and everyone else wanting these raincoats,” she says.



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So Chameleon Intl., located in Oak Ridge, N.C., was created, and after years of intense R & D, ChroMyx™ film was born in 2006. Aperfine feels the applications of this waterproof, temperature-sensitive, color-changing material are virtually unlimited.

Rewarding innovation

Aperfine and her company are the first recipients of the Industrial Fabrics Foundation (IFF) Innovation Award, created to inspire other companies and dreamers to turn ideas into reality. “This is such a big deal, and an honor,” she says. “There are so many companies creating and innovating, so to be acknowledged is something I’m pretty proud of.” Chameleon’s marketing team is excited about the promotional aspects of the award, too, she adds. Presentation of the award and the prize money took place at IFAI Expo Americas 2010 in Orlando at the Chairman’s Gala on Oct. 29.

Aperfine’s nine-year journey from concept to commercialization exemplifies the award’s purpose: identify and encourage ongoing innovation. “We have a working product and a product line, but it’s beyond that,” Aperfine says of her company’s evolution. “It’s that we’re challenging ourselves every day. I think that’s the fun part.”

Aperfine is perhaps an unlikely person to enter the specialty fabrics industry. When she started, she had no background in engineering or the polymer industry, and limited experience in manufacturing and business. Even her considerable skills in communication were rusty after years as a stay-at-home mom for her four children. She started with research, including patent searches. She also cold-called various people in the industry. “I couldn’t really get many companies to talk to me,” she says. “I didn’t really know what I was talking about, so to articulate what I wanted to do was difficult.”