



# Tony Sapienza

Naomi Slip:

This is Naomi Slip. I'm here recording a story for common ground. Will you introduce yourself please?

Anthony Sapienza:

I'm Anthony Sapienza and I'm here to tell a story about textiles and apparels in New Bedford.

Naomi Slip:

So can you share a little bit about that history?

Anthony Sapienza:

I came to new Bedford in 1997 to run a company called Joseph Abboud Manufacturing, that at the time made tailored men's suits for the Joseph Abboud label, for the Giorgio Armani label and for the Calvin Klein label. And at the time it was one of the last clothing, men's clothing, companies standing still standing in New Bedford. And it was actually on a growth spurt when I arrived in 1997. It's interesting because in 1970 and 1980, and even in the early 1990s, New Bedford was an apparel capital. There were over 5,000 union workers making men's suits in New Bedford Fall River communities.

Anthony Sapienza:

In addition, there were another 5,000 women working for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union making women's clothing and sports, where you could walk down the streets of New Bedford and find a factory that would make just about any kind of apparel that is sold here in the United States. What's interesting is how that changed so dramatically in the 1980's, and particularly with the passage of NAFTA in 1990, when the allure, if you will, of low cost labor, first in the south of the United States, where there were no unions and then subsequently to Mexico and to Central America, where the cost of labor was that much less.

Anthony Sapienza:

And then finally the great exodus from even central and Mexican factories to the far east, where, as we all know today, the vast majority of clothing is made and is exported here to the United States. I often say to folks, when I'm talking about our industry, that none of us in the United States today wear clothing that is made in the United States. It's a sad story, but it talks about the whole change in our global economy.

Anthony Sapienza:

But what's interesting is that in the '70s and '80s, there were great men's clothing manufacturing companies here in New Bedford. And I can just tell you about a couple of them and how that leads into the Joseph Abboud story here in New Bedford. At the time 1985, the Ecliff Corporation was making 40,000 men's suits a week in their factory on Belleville Avenue. The Shepherd Justin company was making another 700 sport jackets a day, 3,500 a week in their factory.

Anthony Sapienza:

And what was the original Juan Soda Mills on route 18 in downtown New Bedford, the Calvin corporation, not Calvin Klein, but the Calvin was making boy's and men's clothing employed 750 people and made another 8,000 suits a week. Okay. Right here in New Bedford. And if we were to go over to fall river, we'd find another half a dozen factories equally as engaged, equally productive making men's clothing.



Anthony Sapienza:

And that's as the women's industry had already started its Exodus offshore. When I came here in 1997, those companies had just closed. 1992 was a watershed year in that with the adoption of NAFTA, the incentives for clothing to be made here in the United States no longer existed. But the Abboud company at the time, it was called Riverside Manufacturing, it had grown from a company called Deerfield manufacturing. It was owned by a local guy, and it was in bankruptcy in 1985. When the Italian company GFT [foreign language 00:04:12], which was at the time, the largest producer of men's clothing in the world acquired the company because in 1985, we didn't have a global economy. There were still large duties, 35 to 40% on any article of clothing you brought into the United States. It's when those barriers came down, that the export business, the importation of clothing grew remarkably, but GFT had the foresight to export its technology and say, we could build better men's clothing in New Bedford and not have to pay the 35% duty.

Anthony Sapienza:

So they bought this almost bankrupt company in 1985. They made various labels that they were the licensee of labels like UNGA and Mark Spencer, and other names like that. And they decided that they would get in partnership with a man named Joseph Abud, who had just launched his brand. And they started making Joseph Abud clothing here in America on what we call the Italian GFT system. Which there was no hand work in the clothing, but it duplicated a lot of the hand work characteristics that Italian tailor shops are known for. And GFT was unique in its industrialized processes that made it possible to create a garment that draped beautifully, that was comfortable. And of course, using Italian fabrics, which to this day are the finest in the world for men's clothing, wool and Wooster fabrics woven in the BLE region of Italy, you know, started to pour into New Bedford because Joseph Abud loved those kinds of fabrics.

Anthony Sapienza:

And GFT had the expertise to craft them into really beautiful clothing. In 97' by the time I got here, the company had completely purchased the Joseph Abu company, owned Mr. ABUS company and was expanding the production from 800 suits a day to 1200 suits a day. The company was moving its Calvin Klein production to Mexico because there was what we call in the trade, a diffusion collection, that is a cheaper price product with less expensive fabric. And that could be more successfully made in Mexico and yet still sold in the United States. But the higher end Calvin client clothing came to the New Bedford factory as well. In addition, Georgia Armani created a diffusion collection called money, which was made specifically for the American market and was made exclusively in the New Bedford factory of Italian fabrics. Again, so here you have this wonderful company in 97', 98' and 99' using this incredible skilled labor force.

Anthony Sapienza:

Now, where did this labor force come from? Well, it came from the Portuguese immigrant community that existed in New Bedford. Why was there a Portuguese immigrant community? Because there was a fishing industry and when the fishermen came, their wives needed to work someplace as well. And of course, having the history of textiles in New Bedford made it possible for apparel companies to grow from the textile industry. And quite frankly, at the time, it was not a single textile company left in New Bedford.

Anthony Sapienza:

They had all moved for the same reasons that apparel would be moving in the 1980s and 90s. Why had textiles left New Bedford? They left New Bedford because owners of textile companies were not in love with labor unions. And so they moved to the south where there were no labor unions. And eventually they moved also to Mexico, into the far east where they could in fact make fabric cheaper. But those workers, those immigrant workers, whether they were the original French Canadians or the new Portuguese immigrants all had the needle trade skill, the ability to work with their hands, they had learned how to push a needle when they were growing up because they made clothing in the ASOS or on the mainland.

Naomi Slip:

That's great.



Anthony Sapienza:

So, it was, just so normal for the textile industry to become the apparel industry and the great success of the Joseph boot company in New Bedford was, was threefold. It was first this Italian system of manufacturing that when GFT took over, they brought over a team of tailors and engineers who basically tore the entire factory apart and rebuilt it as an exact duplicate of one of the clothing factories that GFT owned in Italy.

Anthony Sapienza:

GFT had done that successfully in many other parts of the world, they had built a factory in Portugal they had built one in Mexico, they had done a joint venture in Jordan, and they built a factory in Slovakia. And eventually even they built a factory in China, but every single one of these factories was identical. It had the same order of operations, the same machinery and in its day, it was the most sophisticated, technically advanced kind of clothing manufacturing that existed in the world. Everything from computer design to computer manufacturing system, to computerized cutting, and to sewing machines that weren't just, you know, straight sewing machines, but that did multiple operations. Okay. To in fact, duplicate the kinds of work that hand tailoring could do.

Anthony Sapienza:

GFT benefited the Riverside, what was then called Riverside manufacturing, by buying it and making a huge investment in that factory. And that system was one anchor of the success. The second anchor of the success was, as I say, this primarily Portuguese workforce, when I came in 97', I think 90% of the workers in the Joseph bud then Riverside manufacturing company were of Portuguese, Azorean or Cape Verdean extraction.

Anthony Sapienza:

It was only subsequently that we started to see more and different ethnic minorities moving into New Bedford. But in 97, this was a Portuguese factory and for all intensive purposes and as I say, there were great hand skills that these particularly women, although, there was still 20% of the workforce that were men. There were men who ran sewing machines and of course were the cutters and the pressers who did the heavier kind of work in the factory.

Anthony Sapienza:

The third secret to the success of Riverside, was clearly the design capabilities of both, of all three, the Calvin Klein designer, the GI Joe Armani designer, and most importantly for New Bedford, Joseph Abu, who came along with, with GFT. And his artistic inspiration really created in the late 1990s, in the mid 1990s and beyond an aesthetic that was particularly interesting. Joseph had worked for Ralph Lauren, he had worked in a famous men's clothing store in Boston called Louis's that imported lots of stylish Italian clothing.

Anthony Sapienza:

And Joseph had the skillset to kind of synthesize the looks of the Italians with the more traditional natural shoulder clothing of a joke of a Ralph Lauren and the result, the synthesized Joseph Abu product had an appeal, a particular appeal, in the American marketplace, and he led the fashion revolution. He won two council of fashion designer awards, two years in a row for his neck wear collections, which nobody had ever seen neck wear like his. Then of course, what happened in New Bedford was his part of the business grew to the point whereby 2004 or 2005, the factory had been purchased from GFT by a private equity group. Joseph had become involved in the company much more directly, and the other production really went away. Calvin Klein production moved away, GFT lost that license, they lost the Armani license and eventually the entire production. Which had grown from when I first came 600 a day to 800 to a thousand to 1200, all 1200 suits a day were being made for the Joseph label and sold in the finest men's stores.



Anthony Sapienza:

Most notably places like Sax Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom, and some of the finer men's specialty stores. Subsequently, in the 2000s, the brand and the factory continued to prosper. But as I say, the workforce changed, there was new immigration coming to New Bedford and the new Spanish speaking workers brought a completely different aesthetic and work ethic and became instrumental in furthering. Because those second generation or first generation born Portuguese immigrants, you know, their kids went to school, they didn't necessarily want to work in the clothing factories. Okay. Their kids became doctors and lawyers or school teachers and went to UMass and Bristol community college.

Anthony Sapienza:

So the workforce changed dramatically in the 2000s, subsequently in 2008, we all know there was a huge recession. Joseph did not escape the problems of the recession, but the company reemerged with new ownership in 2000. And in 13' when it was bought by the Men's Warehouse and the Men's Warehouse launched the brand exclusively in its 700 stores.

Anthony Sapienza:

And the brand has since thrived in New Bedford, continuing to make a product that is known for the fact that it is made in the USA by an American born designer. But it does use Italian fabrics because they're the finest fabrics in the world. And that's how the company to this day continues to survive and has withstood the trauma of the global pandemic that we are still seeing the effects of, and will continue to thrive. Because there's always going to be a need for men's clothing, for quality men's clothing, made with quality fabrics. And for this workforce that has the hand skills, the skills to make a product that really is something special.