



photos by GUY WARREN/staff photographer

Kelly Wiechelman of Kalamazoo tries on a beaded red Lycra gown Riley Carney designed several years ago.



Like a proud father of the bride, Riley Carney struck a pose with the Team Toyota Dancers, one of self entertainment groups that wore his costumes during last year's auto show.

Bikinis to beauties: A stitch at a time

By Sue Mason
staff writer

Riley Carney is the kind of guy that can keep you in stitches. But don't write the Reford Township man off as a jokester. On the contrary, Carney's talent involves Lycra, needles and thread.

In fact, you've probably seen samples of his work and not even realized it. Those walking Strohs beer cans at the Montreaux Detroit Jazz Festival, The Captain America-style costumes of male strippers America's Ultimate V, Marilyn Turner doing a spoof of Cher's Vic Tanny commercial, Elizabeth Puelo, Miss Michigan 1987, win her swimsuit preliminary, and he designed a swimsuit for former Miss America 1988, Kaye Lanié Raye Ruffo.

If you need just the right costume for a talent competition, a

bathing suit to knock the socks off the judges, or a skating outfit that exudes success, Carney is the person to see.

That's what the Gail and Rice Talent Agency in Livonia did when it needed costumes for a bevy of entertainers.

"I make the auto show costumes for Gail and Rice," Carney said, flipping through photo albums to show off his work. His albums are like a listing from "Who's Who."

"THE LAST four Miss Michigans for the Miss America pageant have been mine," he said, pointing to a collage of photographs on a bulletin board.

If you're at the North American International Auto Show this week, you'll see his sewing showmanship on the Chevy Heart Beat Dancers, whom he has dressed since 1986.

His costumes have been worn by the Team Toyota Dancers, Chevy

Geo dancers, GMC Truck dancers, and numerous narrators and turntable models. His costumes also have been worn by dancers and magicians for GM. But his pride and joy, he said, are the costumes he designed for the 1989 Chevy dancers.

"I'm really proud . . . I did the design; I had total control over the project. Auto show costumes have to hold up. These dancers perform 12 times a day for six months."

But don't look for Carney's Sassy's Designs under costumes in the Yellow Pages. He moved from a storefront in a small mall in Troy last year to the basement of his Redford Township home.

Corner shelves are stacked six deep with bolts of fabric. A Ping-Pong table doubles as his cutting and piecing table. The family cats share the sitting area with customers such as Kelly Wiechelman, who came from Kalamazoo to have Carney create a dance costume for the upcoming Heart of Michigan Pageant.

AND DON'T look for a collection of certificates or diplomas from design schools hanging on the wall. His talent comes from two sources — his high school home economics class and a knack for working with

Lycra. Lycra, you see, is the only — and we mean only — fabric he works with.

Carney got his start, so to speak, at his Columbus, Ga., high school, where he decided to break the mold and enroll in the then-girls-only class.

"I wanted to take home ec and was sent down to see the coach for a men-don't-eat-quiche lecture."

He won the battle after a "Yankee reporter" interviewed him on the lawn of the high school, but the victory had its down side. While learning the basics of sewing, he was enduring taunts in the school halls.

After school, he made his way to Miami Beach, where, while down on his luck, he salvaged scraps of Lycra from behind a store. He used his home ec talents to stitch up a selection of bikinis.

He put the top down on his convertible and headed for the beach, where he sold the bikinis for \$15 each. With that, Carney became a designer and went into business for himself.

HE HAS parlayed his skills by making burlesque costumes, which at the time were "quite extravagant," and costumes for go-go dancers.

He got his start in the Detroit

area by designing competition costumes for Sheryl's School of Dance in Livonia. After watching figure skating on television, he decided to make up two sample costumes in Lycra and take them to the Detroit Skating Club in Bloomfield Hills.

Carney works only with Lycra because it offers a soft drape and stretchability, making it a good camouflage for figure problems and small fluctuations in weight. He also works without patterns.

"There are no costume patterns," Carney said draping white Lycra over Wiechelman's shoulder. "You have to have a knack for this. You either can do this or you can't. I've learned a lot by taking things apart and putting them back together."

Wiechelman is on a fast track in the pageant circuit. A former Miss Saginaw County and current Miss Kalamazoo County, she has set her sights on the Miss Michigan crown. She competed last year and finished fourth. She's decided to give the pageant one more try to satisfy her curiosity as to "what could happen."

FOR THE talent portion of the Heart of Michigan Pageant, she will dance on point to "Singin' in the Rain." Carney's costume will

feature a '50s-style full skirt decorated with raindrop baubles and beads.

Custom-made costumes don't come cheap. Carney has been able to provide for his family quite nicely by turning out three to six costumes a week. A gown for a pageant can run between \$800 and \$3,000, while a skating outfit averages \$125-300.

Wiechelman has been able to afford her costume on her teacher's salary by doing the beadwork — with the help of her mother — on the shoulders.

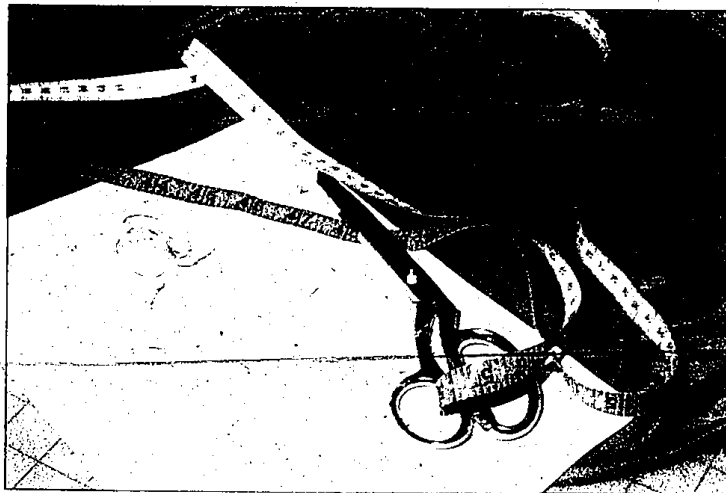
"I definitely think you dance better when you're wearing something you feel great in," Wiechelman said. "Riley's definitely the best. I haven't found a place that comes close to this kind of contest clothing."

Carney isn't one to advertise his business excessively, but by word of mouth his business has grown. He likes the idea of being his own boss, although he does lament those weeks when work is sparse to nonexistent.

But then he need only look at his autographed photo of Dotti, a Phyllis Diller impersonator. Her message is short and to the point: "To the only man who keeps me in stitches."



A drape here, a pin there, and Riley Carney finds out how the Lycra material will fall in his costumes.



Riley Carney is creating a one-of-a-kind dance costume that will have a '50s style skirt and beading for Kelly Wiechelman's rendition of "Singin' in the Rain."