

# Winning *Woolens*

Annual competition showcases home-sewing achievement

BY SARAH MCFARLAND

**F**or sewing enthusiasts, wool is a fiber that inspires creativity and rewards effort.

It offers boundless opportunity, as it is available in knits and wovens, blends and pure options, and tissue to coating weights. Wool is also malleable and responds beautifully to shaping techniques from heat and steam.

With wool-based fabrics as their medium, the contestants in the annual Make It With Wool competition create stunning examples of the art of garment sewing. On the following pages, *Threads* features garments created by six of the 2021 national winners.

The challenge begins at the state level (there is an “at-large” category for those living in non-participating states), and winners continue to a national judging round. MIWW is sponsored by the American Wool Council, the American Sheep


Industry, and American Sheep Industry Women. Garments sewn for the competition must be made from fabric or yarn composed of at least 60 percent wool or specialty fibers such as alpaca, mohair, and cashmere. Competitors age 12 and younger compete as preteens, 13- to 16-year-olds compete as juniors, 17- to 24-year-olds as seniors, and those 25 and older as adults.

Entries are evaluated on sewing excellence, creativity, and the work’s relevance to the maker’s lifestyle. Special accolades for categories such as outstanding construction, machine embroidery, and handwork are awarded at the judges’ discretion. College students are eligible to compete for the Fashion/Apparel Design award, which is featured at the national competition.

To investigate joining the competition yourself, visit [MakeItWithWool.com](http://MakeItWithWool.com).

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*Sarah McFarland is Threads’ editorial director.*



*Sophisticated ensembles  
reveal the expertise  
of Make It With Wool  
competitors.*



## Junior Winner

### Cortney Olinger

Plankinton, South Dakota

"I can't wait to wear this red wool coat in South Dakota's winters," Cortney says. "I love this coat because you can dress it up with the skirt and shirt, or wear it with jeans and keep it casual."

Cortney, who also earned the title Junior Construction Winner in the 2021 competition, followed McCall's 5247 (out of print) for the coat; drafted the plaid pleated skirt pattern herself, and designed the wool-knit top with computer software.

Each piece in the ensemble presented learning opportunities, Cortney relates. Working on her coat, she learned how to sew a notched lapel and a kick pleat.

For the skirt, Cortney wanted the plaid motif to determine the pleat arrangement and that led her to create an original pattern. It was a challenge keeping the plaid aligned in pleats and seams, but the result demonstrates her success. The skirt has an invisible zipper on the side and is fully lined.

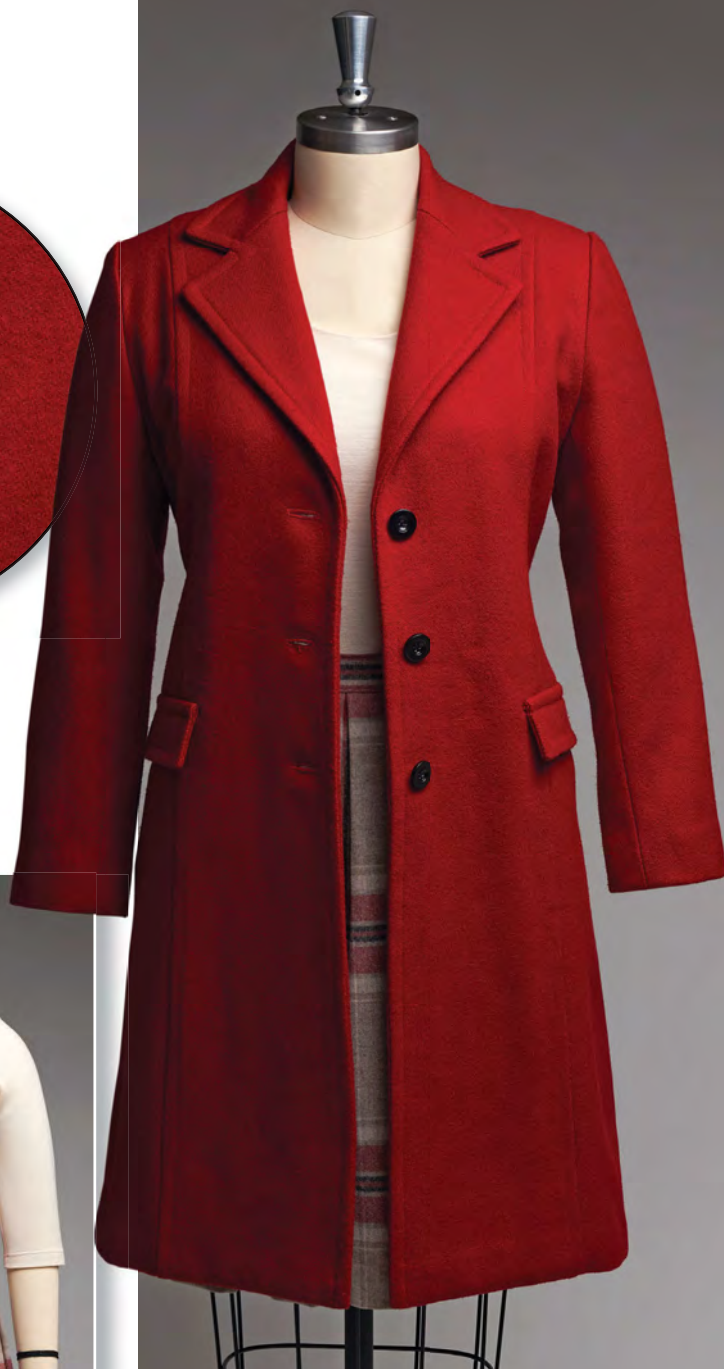
The knit top, with a faced scoop neckline and set-in, three-quarter sleeves, was the first garment she's sewn in wool knit. She learned how to use a cover-stitch machine to hem the shirt.

Cortney, whose work earned her the 2020 MIWW Junior Outstanding Construction Winner award (see *Threads* #212, Dec. 2020/Jan. 2021), started sewing when she was 6 years old. She credits much of her expertise to a neighbor, Mary Christopher, who was a tailor and has helped Cortney develop her skills. When Cortney initially heard about the annual MIWW competition through 4-H participation, she realized she wanted to learn how to sew with wool.

In addition to developing new sewing skills and the recognition from MIWW, Cortney has another reason to appreciate her outfit: "I absolutely love how these garments turned out."



*Discreet side-seam pockets hide behind decorative pocket flaps.*



*The lined skirt closes with a invisible zipper, set into a side seam.*



## Senior Winner

### Roman Merck

Rose Hill, Kansas

“Every year, I tell myself I should have started several weeks earlier,” Roman says. “Then maybe I will be able to sleep for more than four hours a day.” Though it put him through a time crunch, Roman’s meticulous tailoring and exceptional construction earned him the Senior Winner and Senior Construction Winner titles.

His three-piece suit is made from a 77 percent wool suiting with alternating blue and taupe pinstripes on a black ground. The fashion fabric and the dark blue polyester lining came from The Sewing Center in nearby Wichita. Roman began with Vogue 8890 for the jacket and pants and Vogue 7488 (out of print) for the vest. He made the final creation his own, however, with fitting changes and high-end tailoring details, most notably in the jacket.

“For the chest, I tailored a full floating-front canvas to give the suit the curve of a man’s chest,” Roman says. “I ordered hymo canvas, horsehair canvas, and domette from Bias Bespoke Supply Company. The process involved large amounts of detail work, mainly pad stitching.”

There are 11 functioning pockets throughout the ensemble, including double-welt pockets with flaps that, Roman says, left no room for error. Another challenge the project presented to him was matching the alternating pinstripes successfully.

Roman has been sewing for 14 years and credits his mother with teaching him how to sew. He also looks to YouTube videos for advanced techniques. MIWW, in addition to 4-H, has offered an opportunity to develop his skills, he says.

He has worn his suit to a cousin’s wedding and plans to use it for other family gatherings. Roman says it is also the perfect ensemble for appearances as an ambassador for the next MIWW competition.



*The pants feature a three-part waistband with piping and an encased fly. There are 11 working pockets throughout the suit.*





## Adult Winner

### Marcie Mirgon

Midland, Michigan

“Growing up, I always knew about the Make It With Wool competition, but I never competed,” Marcie says. “When my daughter was old enough to compete, we signed up for the competition together. Every year that we compete, we learn new techniques from the folks that judge the construction.”

In the 2021 competition, Marcie’s winning entry is a stunning garment trio. The jacket is based on Simplicity 2256 (out of print). It was made in a houndstooth plaid purchased at Mood Fabrics in New York during a 4-H trip Marcie made several years ago. The piece set the palette for the rest of the ensemble. Her red coat, on p. 59, is McCall’s 7848 in wool from Haberman Fabrics of Clawson, Michigan. The dress is BurdaStyle 6620 (out of print), sewn in a “dream to work with” wool-and-cashmere blend, also from Haberman Fabrics.

Marcie says the outfit shows off finishing techniques she’s learned

over the years. She wanted the jacket fabric to match across the back waistline seam. Instead of gathering, as the instructions directed, she controlled the fabric with a inverted center-back pleat. The jacket pattern did not include a full lining, so she created her own lining pattern pieces.

“I think I put the sleeves of the jacket in five times because I was not happy with the fit and how the plaid lined up,” Marcie says. “It was very frustrating at times, but I love the fit now.”

She planned the ensemble to be versatile. It may be worn as a complete outfit or as individual pieces. In addition, each piece can be dressed up or worn casually for a range of occasions.

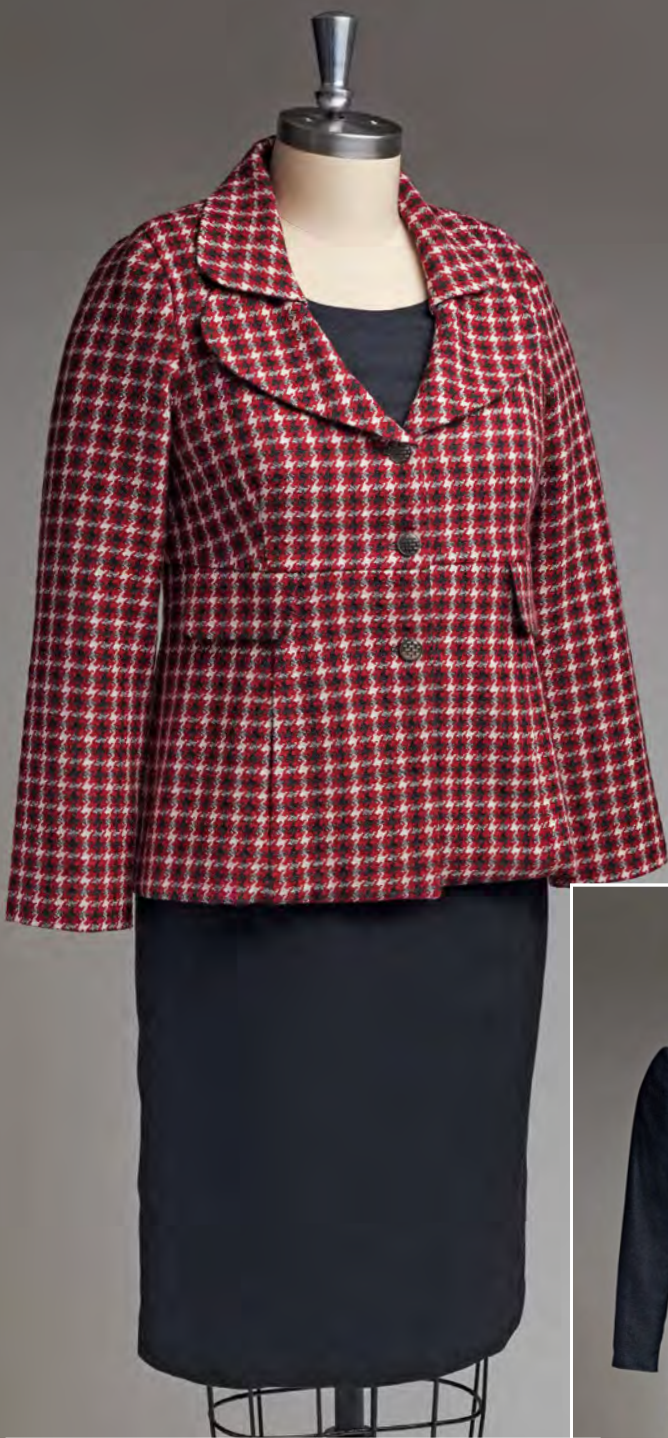
Marcie has been sewing for most of her life, encouraged by her mother, who found her a 4-H sewing teacher Marcie describes as amazing and incredibly patient.

“She never said that things would be too hard for us,” Marcie says. “We would just dive in with her help and guidance.”

Marcie is passing on that teaching tradition, celebrating 20 years of being a 4-H leader in 2021.

“I felt that it was important to share the skills I gained in 4-H with the next generation,” she says.

Marcie’s students are not alone in benefiting from her sewing expertise. She says her current project is a coat for her sister, to be made in the Pendleton wool Marcie won from the Michigan MIWW competition.



*The fabric is precisely aligned across the jacket’s seams and center-back pleat.*



## Fashion/Apparel Design Winner

Hailey Gray

Dallas, Texas

“When you have confidence in a design, trust yourself and you can make it happen,” Hailey says. Her winning entry is a whimsical and eye-catching coat, with Matisse-like faces topstitched onto floating wool felt appliqué.

A student in the Apparel Design and Product Development program at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, Hailey found inspiration on Pinterest, where she saw a photograph of someone topstitching an image of a woman onto a T-shirt.

“I thought that the black topstitching was extremely intriguing,” Hailey says. “I thought, ‘One continuous line . . . what if I could do that with the sewing machine?’ ”

Starting out with a block coat pattern provided by the university, she lengthened the design and drafted a collar that could be worn up or folded down. The white wool fashion fabric came from Bird Brain Designs, and the felt for the faces from ShopWonderfil.com.

Hailey sketched faces in Adobe Illustrator, a graphic design program, then printed and traced them onto tear-away machine-embroidery stabilizer. She carefully arranged and pinned the faces on the unassembled coat pieces. Hailey used black cotton topstitching thread and a lockstitch sewing machine to stitch the faces she’d drawn, following the traced lines on the stabilizer. There were many times she resorted to rotating the flywheel by hand to stitch sharp angles and tight curves.

Hailey took sewing lessons as child but didn’t sew consistently until college. She credits school and YouTube for the further development of her skills, and Baylor faculty for encouraging her and other students to participate in MIWW.

“What is inside of your creative mind is powerful. My confidence wavered throughout the course of this project, but I kept brainstorming for ways to make it,” Hailey says. “The most important thing that I learned was that if you can dream it you can do it.”



*Line-drawn faces are traced with topstitching in the coat's artful embellishment.*





## Handwork Award, 1st place

Michaela Hahn

Fremont, Ohio

"I like to make current, fashionable clothes but add my own embellishment," Michaela says. Her stylish ensemble earned multiple honors in the competition. The Handwork Award recognizes top garments with hand embroidery, beading, or hand-felting techniques. She also won the title of Junior Second Runner-up, as well as the first-place Machine Embroidery Award.

Her A-line, above-the-knee coat was based on Vogue 8626 (out of print). Michaela added an embellishment of felted wool flowers and leaves around the neckline and cuffs. She washed scraps of the coat fabric with soap and hot water, twisted the wet pieces, then let them air dry. Then she formed the felted scraps into dimensional flowers and leaves on the coat, adding wool yarn she had hand-dyed to match, as well as sparkling beads.

Michaela used large snaps, painted with nail polish to match the fabric, instead of buttons. She also personalized the coat, machine-embroidering her initials to the right front facing.

The knit pullover top, in a wool and spandex blend, is McCall's 8003, and the pleated, paper-bag-waisted pants with a tie belt are McCall's 8168. "You can wear the whole outfit together for a special occasion or even the top with a pair of jeans," she says.

Michaela has been sewing for eight years, since she was 8 years old. The 4-H program helped her get started. She's gained knowledge from her grandmother, and been inspired by her older cousins' participation in MIWW, as well as the outfits she's seen by other competitors. Michaela's advice for other sewers is straightforward: "Just be confident and have fun wearing your beautiful outfit."



*Self-fabric wool scraps, partially felted and formed into a textured embellishment, enhance the A-line coat.*





## Handwork Award, 2nd place

Bethany Smith

Stout, Ohio

Before she had an idea of what she was going to create for the competition, Bethany looked over dresses her grandmother had sewn for her.

"As I ran my fingers over all the tucks and careful embroidery, I asked myself how I could reflect my grandmother's work while creating something new," Bethany says.

"This ensemble is the result of that question. I structured the project around teaching myself to smock in tribute to my grandmother's love of sewing."

Her ensemble also pays tribute to her grandmother's flower garden. A curved, lapped detail at the coat's yoke and cuffs, echoed by the blouse's layered tulip sleeves, mimics flower petals. The honeycomb smocking pattern on the blouse alludes to bees. Bethany, who also earned the Senior First Runner-up title in the competition, made the coat in 100 percent wool camel coating. The skirt is a wool-blend gabardine, and the blouse is 100 percent wool gabardine. For the coat, Bethany modified BurdaStyle 6461. She refined the silhouette to her preference, and rounded the ends of the band collar. The skirt and blouse were self-drafted.

The blouse sleeves are a layered tulip design. Bethany experimented with pattern drafts and layering arrangements. Once she had created a successful pattern for the sleeves, she incorporated the concept into the coat yoke and cuffs, adding curved overlays.

Though Bethany says she learned many new construction techniques while making her ensemble, the hand-smocking in the blouse was the most challenging detail. She followed a long process of research and practice. She describes it as a journey: from marking the fabric, to hand-pleating it, honeycomb smocking it, blocking the piece, adding piping, and finally inserting the panel into the garment.

It was at a 4-H sewing event several years ago that an Ohio MIWW representative encouraged her to participate in the competition.

"Since then, I've always wanted to return because of the opportunities for growth MIWW presents and the amazing community of sewers involved in the competition," Bethany says.



*The honeycomb smocking and petal-like elements throughout the ensemble are reminiscent of beehives and flowers.*

