

DREW OSWALD

Better materials, more choices and some enterprising adaptive clothing designers are making it less of a hassle to look and feel your best.

The Right Fit

By Brittany Martin

There was a time when

finding comfortable, fashionable clothes to accommodate medical devices or mobility issues was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

While jogging suits and scrubs are functional, they're hardly appropriate for the workplace or other occasions that require more formal attire. Many times, these outfits also sacrifice comfort and style.

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Now, more and more designers are addressing the need for specialized clothes that incorporate fashion, function and comfort. A quick Google search for “wheelchair fashion” will turn up dozens of results, so figuring out where to begin can be a challenge.

There’s a wide variety to suit nearly any personality, activity, age and budget. Fun, trendy designs are constantly being developed for men and women. Even better, these clothes are made with the seated frame in mind and are built with clever, functional details.

Raid Your Closet

Sometimes the best place to start looking for adaptive clothing is your own closet.

Stephanie Alves of ABL Denim says a few simple alterations can greatly reduce the effort it takes to get dressed.

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO

ily be converted to look like a cardigan or poncho with the addition of a few buttons.

A trendy skirt option that needs no alteration is a wrap skirt, which can be placed on a wheelchair and folded over the seated person’s lap.

If finger dexterity is a problem, a tailor can alter a bra or shirt to close with magnets, and jackets can have zippers added to the front and back to make getting in and out of the garments less hassle.



Heidi McKenzie, above, founder of Alter UR Ego, sports a pair of her adaptive jeans at the 2016 Los Angeles Abilities Expo. At right, ABL Denim makes adaptive sweat-shorts for men and women.

For example, there are department store pieces, such as an oversized scarf that can eas-

If an old pair of pants has become too short or has holes, make them into capri cut-offs or sew on decorative patches, Alves says.

Alterations can be expensive, so it’s best to do them yourself, if possible, or reach out to a family member or friend who has the necessary skills.

Good Jeans

When alterations aren’t possible, several brands offer clothes designed with a seated person in mind.

The pants in the adaptive clothing category generally are made of softer fabrics, have a high-rise backside and angled thigh pockets for leg bags,

COURTESY OF ABL DENIM

cellphones or other useful items. Some brands also include details like forgiving elastic waistbands, tummy control, drop-down panels, pull-tab zippers, disguised catheter openings (for women) and fewer seams to help prevent pressure sores.

ABL Denim (available at abldenim.com and walmart.com) offers denim jeans and denim sweatpants in several styles and colors for men, women and children. In response to customer demand, pants in khaki, black and navy blue, as well as pleated pants and twill, stretch twill and denim shorts will soon be joining Alves' adaptive fashion line.

"Clothing that has some accessibility to it is a daily living aid," Alves says. "You're going to see, as time goes on, more and more fashion, and there's a lot more talk lately in the news about equality in every area, so there's a



ABL Denim's adaptive jeans have an angled thigh pocket to carry a cellphone, wallet or other items.

greater awareness now of inclusive design, or universal design, so you're going to see a lot more choices."

With funding from a successful Kickstarter campaign that ended last August, designer Heidi McKenzie recently founded a line of men's and women's jeans called Alter UR Ego (alterurego.co).

McKenzie, who sustained a T-4 spinal-cord injury in 2007, is working on sourcing the materials for a full line of adaptive clothing designs.

"Finding fashionable, functional clothing was out of the question, so I decided to create it myself," McKenzie says. "Now, more people are realizing, 'Hey, we need clothing, too, and we're [wheelchair users] going to be the only ones who know what we need.'"

McKenzie says she wants to help people with various disabilities create more independence for themselves and express themselves through fashion.



COURTESY OF OPEN STYLE LAB

Participants in the summer 2015 Open Style Lab program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology created wearable solutions for clients with disabilities.



About 400 people attended Project Rollway 2015 at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta.

"I've had so many people come up to me and say, 'I haven't worn jeans in 20-plus years,' and giving them the opportunity to do that is just great," McKenzie says. "I feel like more and more, jeans are becoming even more of a formal wear, where you can dress up a pair of jeans and it'll still be acceptable most places you go."

A variety of other products, in addition to jeans and pants, are available from Silverts (silverts.com), Britain-based Able 2 Wear (able2wear.co.uk), IZ (izcollection.com) and Endless Ability (endlessability.com).

Just For Teens

If you're the parent of a teenager, you know most want to keep up with the latest trends, fit in with the crowd and dress just like their friends. Add a wheelchair into the mix, and it's nearly impossible to find an outfit that meets their approval.

To that end, the Shepherd Center in Atlanta has conducted an annual fashion show

called Project Rollway since 2013, featuring clothes for youth and teens.

Project Rollway is a fundraiser for Shepherd Center's adolescent rehabilitation programs, and the models are all former patients and some staff members. This year's event is scheduled for June 24.

Some of the outfits are provided by adaptive clothing designers like IZ, WheelieChix (wheelchix-chic.com) and AG Apparel (agapparel.com), while others are from standard brands like Brooks Brothers (brooksbrothers.com), Banana Republic (bananarepublic.com) and Alabama-based Southern Traditions (southerntraditionsclothing.com). The teens also are outfitted with accessories and shoes from brands such as Oka-B (oka-b.com). In total, outfits range in price from \$150 to \$1,000.

"As teenagers, they're trying to find their identity, and body image is a big issue," says Patty Antcliff, a spinal-cord injury occupational therapist at the Shepherd Center. "We thought this would be a great way for



BOTH PHOTOS BY TERESA FOY

Above and below, models for Project Rollway wear outfits supplied by Southern Traditions.



Fashion Forward

Someone who is taking accessible fashion even a step further is Lucy Jones.

Jones is originally from Cardiff, Wales, but now lives in New York City. She

has made the *Forbes* "30 Under 30" list for her "seated design" collection. The collection takes a universal, or inclusive, design approach to clothing.

According to her website, Jones is "exploring the relationships between disability and beauty, and it grew out of a personal response to a comment made by my cousin Jake, who has hemiplegia.

As a result, I am now focused in providing a seated design practice so that disability can be incorporated into the design process from the outset."

A graduate of the Parsons School of Design in New York, Jones' goal is "analyzing an existing design infrastructure and encouraging implementation of value and purposeful design practices for seated design."

Jones recently entered a collaboration as the creative director for a nonprofit called Runway of Dreams, which worked with the Tommy Hilfiger brand to launch an adaptive version of select styles from its children's line.

Another place where the future of adaptive fashion is the focus is the Open Style Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Mass.



TERESA FOY

FASHION

Do's & DON'TS

Do: Wear clothes that emphasize the top portion of your body, such as lace or off-the-shoulder tops.

Do: Buy clothes from reputable online dealers so you can return pieces that don't work.

Do: Mix and match. Try some adaptive clothing mixed with some off-the-rack pieces that fit well.

Do: Stick to more monotone colors in order to look more put-together.

DON'T: Be afraid to experiment.

DON'T: Wear pants that are too long. They will bunch up at your ankles and won't give you a clean line.

DON'T: Allow shirts to have too much material in the front, as the extra bulk will make you look wider.

DON'T: Buy clothes that make you feel uncomfortable or less attractive.

Compiled from comments by Stephanie Alves of ABL Denim and Heidi McKenzie of Alter UR Ego.

Open Style Lab is a 10-week cross-disciplinary research program where teams of designers, engineers and occupational therapists are chosen to create wearable solutions for clients with disabilities. Each team of fellows is required to produce a stylish garment that solves problems their client experiences in his or her daily life.

In the last year, Open Style Lab released its first client prototype onto the mass market. The Rayn Jacket is offered to the public through Betabrand (betabrand.com), an online clothing community based in San Francisco.

Client Ryan DeRoche, who sustained an incomplete C-4 spinal-cord injury in 2011, wanted a jacket that was easy to take on and off, would keep him warm and dry, and would also keep his lap dry.

The result of the team's research was the Rayn Jacket, a hoodie-style jacket with a fold-out pouch that covers the lap. The item is waterproof, slips on and off easily and has a zippered back.

For the 2016 summer program, the focus will be fashionable technology and ways to integrate technology in a meaningful way.

"We've seen market examples of wearable technology, assistive tech, but we haven't really found any solutions where wearable technology is really beneficial for people, in particular for people with disabilities," says Grace Jun, education partner for Open

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Martha Childress uses an exoskeleton to walk the runway at the Shepherd Center's 2014 Project Runway in Atlanta.

Style Lab. "When we think of fashion, we think of it sometimes as it's frivolous and might not be needed for someone who has a disability. For them, it's more about getting their functionality or physical disability solved."

Jun said she hopes this year's case studies will gain more traction in fashion.

"A lot of people from the fashion area are starting to drive their attention to socially centric work, so I'm hoping this year's program will bridge a little more for assistive technologies, wearable technologies, and all types of different tech and occupational therapists to look into fashion as a different type of medium and tool," Jun says. ■