

TAXI

Baday battles the cold

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Canuck designer helps create coat for the homeless



Canadian designer Lida Baday and Taxi executive creative director Steve Mykolyn with their jacket for the homeless.

"You stuff or unstuff the pockets as you need to, so the same jacket that keeps you dry in the rain becomes something that can protect you from extreme temperatures."

—Lida Baday

The elegant modernism of Lida Baday is not the sort of thing you normally see worn in a meat locker. But this is no ordinary Lida Baday coat. The revered Canadian designer has crafted an all-season garment for the homeless than can be stuffed with newspapers for insulation.

The idea was conceived and later tested in a meat locker by Steve Mykolyn, an old friend of Baday's from her student days at Ryerson. Mykolyn is the executive creative director of Taxi, an advertising firm with offices across Canada and in New York. He conceived the notion of the 15 Below Project last summer after a request from Taxi chairman Paul Lavoie, who had challenged staff to come up with a way to mark the agency's 15th year in business.

“It could have been anything, like a party, or a book,” Mykolyn explains. “Then I was walking home from a ball game one night with my 17-year-old son and there were a lot of homeless people on the street. He always gives them money and I never do. He asked me why I don’t and I didn’t have an answer. It was not something I had ever thought much about. That woke me up to their plight.”

One aspect of that plight — the cold weather alert that is issued when the temperature drops to –15 C — meshed perfectly with the company’s 15th anniversary initiative. Mykolyn started researching insulation and found newspaper is the second most popular form after fibreglass.

Tour de France cyclists still use newspapers under their jerseys — handed out by fans on mountaintops —as thermal insulators. “And we loved the irony of using the ads that we place in newspapers for something other than advertising.”

“Newspapers are also easy for anyone to get their hands on,” says Baday, who found the project a technical challenge. After researching fabrics, she settled on black Aquamax, a waterproof, breathable fabric laminated with a nonporous membrane.

The coat is an anorak-style, with drawstrings at the waist and hem. A hood can be folded into the collar. Two pockets in the hood, four on the chest, a large one on the back, and a long one down each sleeve can be stuffed with crumpled newspaper as the temperature drops.

“You stuff or unstuff the pouches as you need to, so the same jacket that keeps you dry in the rain becomes something that can protect you from extreme temperatures,” Baday says. In warm, dry weather, the entire jacket can be folded into one of the pockets and there are straps so it can be carried as a backpack or used as a pillow.

Mykolyn put the coat to the test by spending eight hours in a meat locker that was –18 C and part of the time in an ice cream freezer that was –29 C. “I had a paramedic monitoring my heart rate and blood pressure and they stayed constant the entire time,” he says.

A factory in Vietnam, SGWICUS, which also makes clothes for Gap and Banana Republic, will manufacture 3,000 of the coats. They will be distributed to homeless across Canada and in the U.S. in March. Taxi is announcing the project now so its clients understand why they are not getting Christmas gifts this year. Those funds and the budget for staff holiday parties are going to manufacture and ship the coats instead.