

FLORIDA OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR IS TEMPLE'S NEW COACH SPORTS

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MEMORY WEAR

Wear your heart on your T: Nostalgic neighborhood pride becomes fashion statement and commodity.

By Elizabeth Wellington
INQUIRER FASHION WRITER

If you remember Frank's Soda Works in South Philadelphia, know the attributes of both the Electric Factory and the Arena, or understand the rivalry between the students at St. Maria Goretti and Girls High, then Philadelphia entrepreneur Fred Lavner has something for you.

In August, Lavner launched a line of nostalgic T-shirts and hoodies cleverly named B4 — as in *before* B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue left Straw-

berry Mansion for Mount Airy, then the suburbs. Or *before*, when Pep Boys was just a local shop owned by local boys Manny, Moe, and Jack. Essentially, Lavner's soft cotton apparel hails all things quintessentially old-school Philly, from neighborhoods as far north as Oxford Circle and as far west as Overbrook Park to dining spots such as Murray's Delicatessen, Barson's Luncheonette — "Home of the Big Shissel" — and Horn & Hardart. (On his website www.retrophilly.com, he also sells pocketbooks fashioned from Pennsylvania license plates.) See **T-SHIRTS** on E2



Philly where? Top, Phil's Luncheonette, at 57th and Beaumont, was Fred Lavner's hangout. Left, celebrating the West Oak Lane of the 1950s and '60s. Center, Lenny's, with locations in the Northeast, on South Street, and at the Shore, sold hot dogs. Right, an improbable pairing of Eisenhower and Tina Turner in a faux concert at the old Arena, at 45th and Market.

Photo illustration, Logos: retrophilly.com, T-shirts: istockphoto.com

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Neighborhood-pride T-shirts: Nostalgia with a boast

T-SHIRTS from E1 plates and books celebrating the city or its sports teams.)

But Lavner's success — he sells more than 500 pieces a week — isn't just a Philly thing. Fashion experts say apparel that celebrates places satisfies our craving to be unique and cultivates a sense of pride.

"Brands are trying to re-create connections with consumers," explained Natalie W. Nixon, director of fashion industry management at Philadelphia University. "We are coming out of this recessionary state, so these images of our childhood help us romanticize about a time when things were simpler, easier."

Lavner, who grew up at 57th and Beaumont, believes Philadelphia is a prime candidate for serving up memories. He offers more than 500 designs online, and at least 600 more are in the pipeline, including one for Tastykake.

"Anything that's Mount Airy, I love," said Lewis Jaffee, 55, a special-events planner who owns about three dozen of the B4 T's. "I am a boomer and I've seen all kinds of changes in Philly. But there is a special place in my heart for the old days."

Most lifelong Philadelphians would appreciate the trip down memory lane, but the T's, priced at \$19.95, are especially authentic because of Lavner's attention to retro detail. Some of the images feature the original business logo: The Barson's T features the red script from the 1950s menu and neon sign. Others are re-created by Lavner's Center City-based research and design team with permission from the business owner or the advertising agency that created the design.

For example, when it came to the design for Formost, a processor of kosher salamis, bologna, and pastrami in South Philly, Lavner asked remaining members of the family if he could use the company's World War II airplane insignia. Then the design team added a salami and the tagline: Send a Salami to Your Boy in the Army.

"I get e-mails from families of local restaurants, clubs, businesses, and publishing companies that are offering their intellectual property to turn into apparel," Lavner



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer
Same place, decades apart: Fred Lavner, above, at the former Phil's Luncheonette site, and at right, hanging out at the place he called "the center of our universe."

said. "This is a way to keep old family businesses and memories alive."

Memories are fashion commodities these days — especially on T-shirts that can be cheaply reproduced here rather than in factories abroad.

Some of them are universal: Macy's is now pushing Smurfs, of '80s fame. There's also a resurgence of childhood favorites like Hello Kitty and early Star Wars memorabilia.

It's hard to pinpoint the origin of the trend, but it's safe to say these neighborhood-centric shirts have been around for the last five years or so. Initially, we saw shout-outs to New York boroughs, especially Brooklyn. Even New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority became part of the trend, printing T-shirts and sweat-shirts with the entire city subway map on them, or ones touting individual lines.

"It's a different type of nostalgia," said Sarah Shirley, a New York-based trend expert. "With all these big-box retailers, everything has been homogenized, so this is not something you are going to find in H&M. It's not global nostalgia or national nostalgia.

It's regional nostalgia. And that is connecting with people."

Six years ago, 29-year-old Julia DiNardo felt homesick for Pittsburgh, having moved to New York to work in the fashion industry. So she launched Neighbor Teaze, a line of \$25 to \$36 T-shirts that acknowledge Pittsburgh neighborhoods like the South Side ("No Parking Available Since 1942") and Squirrel Hill.

"When they first launched, I thought I was just going to sell a few," said DiNardo, whose shirts are available at neighborborteaze.com and etsy.com.

"But people ended up loving them and they keep asking for more. I've done 15 neighborhoods and there are 88 in Pittsburgh, so I have a ways to go."

In Lavner's odes to neighborhoods (mostly ones that were predominantly Jewish in the 1950s and '60s), he also depicts the local relevant businesses. For instance, Cheltenham's T lists the Chuckwagon, Glenside Theater, and Pauline & Eddy's.

When Lavner was a kid, he was a regular at Phil's Luncheonette in Southwest

Philly. "It was the center of our universe," Lavner, 57, said, then added, "Of course, there is a shirt for Phil's."

Lavner is working on T's with references specific to other ethnicities and decades, too: This month he added Yorktown, Swampoodle, Logan (there's already a Jewish 1950s version), and the Diamond Street neighborhood near Temple, predominantly African American neighborhoods in North Philly.

"We wanted to do the research and make it all accurate," he said. "We know we have so much more to add."

After graduating from Temple University, Lavner held a handful of marketing jobs, including chief creative officer at Today's Man, which became his introduction into the apparel industry. Later, while working in real estate, he became friendly with Peter Capolino, owner of sports apparel company Mitchell & Ness, where he served as a consultant. It was through his connection with Mitchell & Ness that he started designing and manufacturing T-shirts.

But he didn't get into the memory business until he started noticing that baby boomers didn't really have the retail pick of the litter when it came to T's: Why would anyone his age have to wear "World's Greatest Grandpa"?

"My generation was the same generation that coined phrases like 's--- happens,'" he said, laughing. "I wanted them to have something fresh."

And now Lavner plans to spread the word. Having raised close to half a million dollars with a group of local investors including retired Jefferson Bank executive Peter Albert, Lavner will launch Retrobrooklyn.com in January and Retrobaltimore.com in spring. His team is researching Detroit and Cleveland as well.

"It's more than the place. It's about the old restaurants, old clubs, old TV shows," Lavner said. "That's what makes our pieces market-centric. That's what makes them special."

Contact fashion writer Elizabeth Wellington at 215-854-2704 or ewellington@phillynews.com. Follow her on Twitter at ewellingtonph.



Julia DiNardo launched Neighbor Teaze, a line of apparel that acknowledges Pittsburgh neighborhoods.