

KNITTING IT ALL TOGETHER

In Orbell Street, Sydenham – once a hub for textile manufacturing in Ōtautahi Christchurch – most of the knitwear factories have long since closed. One of the last remaining is Weft Knitting Company. We meet the company's tenacious founder Hugh Douglas, whose influence and impact extends well beyond the factory walls.

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EARLY 2023, NEWS stories began popping up about a Canterbury clothing company sending warm merino garments and underwear to war-torn Ukraine to help give comfort to Ukrainian soldiers. Weft has been on my radar ever since, and I am delighted to have secured today's interview with company founder Hugh Douglas.

Arriving at Weft's premises, I am greeted by a trim 70-year-old who looks much younger than his years and has plenty of energy to boot. 'This place is what keeps me going,' he says, after politely dismissing the idea there could be a quiet retirement up ahead. 'This is what gets me up in the morning and keeps me motivated. At age 70, I've still got 20 active years to go in business with the support of my family.'

He's been at the helm of Weft for more than four decades, steering the business through various marketing and production challenges with trademark focus and determination. The company was an early

adopter of advanced whole garment knitting technology, and the introduction of merino wool/possum fur blends from the late 1990s proved another astute move. Over the past six years, there has been a large investment in new knitting technology. Faster knitting times, as well as bringing in more whole garment machines, has helped keep the business competitive.

Weft's brands include luxury Noble Wilde Knitwear, Bay Road Merinos, and a thermal wear range of Thermerino and Thermadry undergarments. Weft sells into both New Zealand and offshore markets. 'Weft's exports to the UK and Europe have increased steadily over the last 16 years, thanks primarily to our New Zealand sales and marketing manager and our European sales manager, based in London,' explains Hugh.

As we chat, it becomes clear that Hugh cares deeply about his staff and is always ready to give support when needed, for example with financial budgeting. 'What people don't necessarily appreciate

is that Weft is not a sweatshop; we're providing good long-term careers for skilled Christchurch people. I like to lead by example: I am hard-working, I know all my 73 staff by name. They are my extended family, and myself and my management team are always concerned about their wellbeing.'

The depth of that connection becomes obvious when we take a walk around Weft's extensive factory floor and warehouse premises, where we meet staff members like Ukrainian paediatrician Iryna Pershakova, who fled her home country almost two years ago and is very grateful to have found a safe refuge here. Alongside her work in the factory and ongoing English classes, she makes traditional dolls to fundraise for children's hospital care in Ukraine. We also meet Rob Harris, who started at Weft as a 15-year-old and is still with the company 13 years later. 'Hugh is a great man,' says Rob, noting how Hugh has always gone the extra mile for him. 'I don't think people realise how big his heart is.'



Hugh is proudly draped in the Ukrainian flag that was sent in thanks for the garments supplied to support Ukrainian soldiers. Behind him is an old original: a knitting machine, acquired from Mosgiel Woollens more than 40 years ago and still doing good service.



Clockwise From Top Left Investment in new knitting technology has been pivotal to success; Rob Harris started at Weft as a 15-year-old and has never looked back; highly efficient knitting machines on the factory floor in Sydenham; Weft is proudly supporting the Andrew Bagshaw Memorial Trust; despite a number of advancements in technology over the last 40 years, it is still very much a hands-on process; Iryna Pershakova, who fled Ukraine almost two years ago is also grateful to have found a safe refuge at Weft.



In the wider community, Weft is a discerning donor, giving support where it can make the biggest impact to organisations such as the 180 Degrees Trust, the Christchurch City Mission, Canterbury Charity Hospital, The Youth Hub and countless other charities over the last 30 years. Every August, Weft holds a charity factory sale, with two nominated charities sharing 30 per cent of the sales revenue. Last year's charity factory sale money went to the Christchurch City Mission and to pay freight on woollen underwear being sent to Ukraine, a cause close to Hugh's heart.

In January 2023, a visibly emotional Hugh appeared in a 1News item covering Weft's efforts to help clothe Ukrainian soldiers going through a tough northern hemisphere winter. Their suffering is not something he has been able to ignore. 'I will not sit back and do nothing when my company has the ability to make a tangible difference to the soldiers on the front line defending their country.'

Back in October 2022, Vladimir Rodnyanskiy – Vice President of the Ukrainian Association of New Zealand – knocked on the right door, having arrived at Weft with a plan to buy a few woollen

garments to send back to Ukraine. Hugh warmed to his cause and invited Vladimir to choose what he wanted at no cost. The two struck up a rapport, paving the way to Weft's subsequent donation of 1,500 surplus merino garments for Ukrainian soldiers. Backed by a Givealittle fundraiser, a further shipment of 900 merino undergarments was then made.

Weft continues to stand by Ukraine, with 700 woollen undergarments to be supplied this year at cost, with no margin for profit. 'Our army friends sent this back,' says Hugh, showing me a Ukrainian flag, a prized item in Weft's boardroom. 'You can see all these signatures on it from different divisions within the Ukrainian army – it really shows how much all of this matters.'

He then hands me a book. It's *The Quiet Hero*, Andrew Bagshaw by Philip Matthews, which describes the extraordinary life and death of a Kiwi volunteer aid worker in Ukraine. Copies of the book are being sold through the Weft Factory Shop and \$20 from each book sale is being donated to the Andrew Bagshaw Memorial Trust. Hugh knows Andrew's parents, Sue and Phil Bagshaw, through his charitable involvements. Dame Sue chairs The Youth Hub Trust while Dr Phil chairs The

Above Samvel, who fled Ukraine, is happy to have a new life in NZ, working at Weft. Here he is pictured checking a whole garment that has just come off the knitting machine.

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Clockwise From Top Left The finishing touches: linking the neckband; A man of many talents Hugh enjoys picking up the paint brush to capture special moments such as this one of grandson Felix and dog Cosmo; Ukrainian soldiers taking receipt of their woollen goods.

Canterbury Charity Hospital's Trust. 'I first met Sue and Phil in 2005 when I, and others, organised a charity concert at the Town Hall to raise money [\$60,000] to establish the Canterbury Charity Hospital ... I really wanted to support the book to help Phil and Sue keep their boy's name alive and to promote his story.'

Hugh is known, too, for his philanthropic activism on the environment. He has grave concerns about the state of the planet and the unfolding impacts of climate change. Needless to say, Weft is already well into its own sustainability journey, transitioning from plastic to paper packaging and with fabric waste being upcycled into hand-knitting yarn.

It is an interesting fact that Hugh's whole career in textiles might never have happened had he not dropped out of Southland Boys' High School part way through sixth form. The year was 1970 and the only job prospect back then – through the school careers advisor – was as a trainee technician at Mosgiel Woollens in Dunedin. 'My father took me up there and I got the job – it was serendipitous, as

that's what got me into the industry and I loved the knitting process.'

Having cut his teeth in Mosgiel, he then took up a role as a trainee designer with Tekau Knitwear in Ashburton before jetting off to the UK to work as a knitwear designer for Leicester-based J Pick & Sons. 'We were doing business with British home stores, Marks & Spencer and fashion boutiques in London.'

By 1979, Hugh had made the decision to return to New Zealand to once again work for Mosgiel Woollens, this time as their designer. Six months later, however, the company was in collapse. With the writing on the wall, it might have been a good time to switch careers. Instead, Hugh purchased some of the company's older knitting plant and by 1982 had started Weft, initially making shearers singlets and string vests. Making the latter opened up access to menswear stockists throughout New Zealand, previously supplied by Mosgiel Woollens. 'I'd always had a driving ambition to own my own business – I'm a bit of an obsessive,' confesses Hugh, reflecting on what

drove him back then. 'Like most business founders, I still live and breathe it and have the passion to succeed.'

Out of the blue, when I ask how he keeps in such good shape, he comes out with a surprising comment about having broken his back in 2022, falling out of a tree. 'It repaired itself but as a result I have got into doing personal training sessions twice a week.'

Another surprise is learning that he paints for pleasure two hours a week. He also likes to go fishing in Akaroa with his grandchildren. Hugh tells me he is happily married, with three children – all now in the business – and five grandchildren. 'My wife has been extremely supportive in our 40 years of marriage.'

With the next generation now involved too, Weft's factory on Orbell Street looks set to continue carrying the torch for the knitting industry in Canterbury for many more years to come. ●

Those wanting to help can donate at givealittle.co.nz/cause/help-wounded-ukrainians-to-live-their-lives