Sometimes, solutions to big problems are obvious, in hindsight. Take the issue of excess clothing, the gear that fashion outlets can't sell. Perfectly good pieces, with tags attached, once destined for landfill. Surely there must be another way. Recycling is one option, though only about seven per cent of textile waste is recycled in this country. So what about all the people who need a new wardrobe but can't afford it? Recently released prisoners, families fleeing domestic violence, people who've lost everything in floods or fire, struggling students who need a new outfit for a formal or job interview... Glynis Traill-Nash meets the brains behind Thread Together who match the needy with their new clothes, solving two problems at once.

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EXCESS THREADS & SILVER LININGS

What happens to all the clothes that fashion brands can't sell? Once they'd end up in landfill; now they clothe thousands of people a week

It's

quite overwhelming," says Andie Halas as she surveys countless pallets stacked high with cardboard boxes wrapped together with plastic. Towering cages filled with clothing run along one wall of this Sydney warehouse, while shelving units along another wall require a cherry picker to reach the smaller boxes at the top. On the ground, open boxes are piled high with clothing marked by category: *women's activewear, 12-14; men's jeans 32-34; girl's dresses...* A delivery from Calvin Klein needs unpacking, along with another from Athlete's Foot. "I want you to understand how quickly this moves," Halas says. "You look at this and think: is this a year's worth?"

It's not. The boxes from Australian fashion companies arrive every day, filled with brand new products, tags still attached. This is what's unsold at the end of the season. Once upon a time most of these clothes would have ended up in landfill but for 10 years Halas's organisation Thread Together has been distributing them to people in need, solving two issues at once. Some have called her the Ronni Kahn of fashion, alluding to the food waste champion who founded OzHarvest, though Halas humbly shakes her head at the comparison. "As we've grown and we work on a larger scale, we're always trying to bring it back to what it originally was, which was to provide people with dignity and give them what they need and what they want." Adds chief executive Anthony Chesler: "We're providing a forgotten basic human right."

Champion: Andie Halas with donated clothes in Thread Together's Sydney warehouse

The lightbulb moment for Halas came from an unlikely source: a pile of towels. Quite a big pile, to be fair. She was working with husband Anthony for his family's swimwear business Seafolly (before its 2014 sale to L Catterton) and a print production issue rendered some 200 perfectly good towels unfit for sale. "I was looking at these towels and thought, I'm not putting those in landfill and I know we can't sell them. What are we going to do with them?"

Donating to charity seemed an obvious choice, but going into the Asylum Seeker Centre at its former address in Sydney's Surry Hills to drop off the donation made her realise there must be something more she could do. "There were people who don't have anything, and they were literally looking through a clothing bin which had old bras, one dirty shoe and dirty underwear mixed in, trying to find something for themselves," she says. "I thought, this is unnecessary. I know my friend down the road has a big fashion company and I know he has excess stock. So that is how it began."

Today you'd be hard-pressed to find a fashion brand operating in this country that doesn't donate its excess stock to the cause, with more than 1000 brands signed up. They range

from designer names such as Zimmermann, Aje, P.E Nation and M.J Bale to high street brands such as Uniqlo and Cue. There's underwear from Simone Pérèle and Bonds and accessories from Mara and Mine, Poppy Lissiman and Oroton. Multi-brand retailers such as Myer, David Jones and The Iconic are also on board. Thread Together solves a waste problem for the brands, which can receive a tax break for the donated clothing. The organisation then works with about 700 charities, social service agencies and referral centres that "triage" people to be outfitted in a new wardrobe of their choice through four distribution channels.

First up is a network of 11 hubs, both permanent and pop-up, across the country, including in Adelaide, Canberra and Ballarat. These are like normal retail stores but customers come armed with a referral and a gift card rather than cash. "They can come in and take their time to choose clothing, try it on," says Chesler. "People come in somewhat vulnerable and feeling a little bit uncomfortable, but they leave empowered – it's given them a sense of presence."

Secondly, a fleet of nine vans can be stocked to go into regional or remote areas, including after crises such as bushfires or floods, or to suburban locations with high volumes of people in need. An online channel allows customers or their case workers to order what they need, just like online shopping. "Volunteers come through to pick and pack," says Chesler as we enter the batch picking area and wander down the aisles. "We've got women's clothing, everything from activewear, return-to-work wear, casual wear, jeans. Men's on this side, then kids running down here."

Outfits are co-ordinated by the volunteers according to style and purpose. Aside from size, age and gender, other factors taken into account include religion and circumstance. "At a time when new arrivals from Afghanistan were coming in, we ran out of scarves because there was such a demand, and stockings," says Halas. "And we can't pack green clothing for people who are coming out of jail," adds Chesler.

A fourth channel is currently being rolled out through a network of women's shelters. "Many women arrive with nothing," says Chesler. "In the middle of the night," adds Halas. "These [shelters] will be stocked with a capsule of clothing which will have underwear, socks, loungewear, pyjamas," continues Chesler. "So the idea is to make this accessible immediately on arrival. We've been trying to raise funds to roll these out into 100 women's refuges."

The not-for-profit organisation clothes between 2500 and 3000 people a week, and estimates it has saved almost 5.5 million items from landfill and dressed 750,000 people. From its early days, Thread Together has partnered with companies to support its work, including transport giant Toll, which supports with logistics, and industrial property group Goodman, which provides this warehouse.

"We don't receive any government funding," says Chesler, who joined in mid-2019 from a background in finance and consulting. "By choice, because there's a big advocacy piece in place to secure that type of funding and most is single-year and tied to a specific project, so we are very much philanthropy-led. We've moved away from the usual ways charities fundraise. We've integrated fundraising into the partnerships with fashion brands."

That might include brands asking for point-of-sale donations at the checkout of their online store, or social media drives for special occasions. For example, for its 90th anniversary, RM Williams ran a competition in May asking anyone who owns a pair of its boots to take a photograph and post it on Instagram; each entry would be matched by a $5 donation from the company to Thread Together. The competition received 12,000 entries. The $5 is significant: it's what Thread Together considers is the cost of dressing one person in a wardrobe of on average 30 items of clothing.

"It's a combination of different ways to engage the brand, leverage their time, leverage their talent, leverage their networks and then let them leverage their customer networks to fundraise, which frees up our time to focus on building the partnerships and nurturing those," says Chesler.

Of the 40 to 50 volunteers in the warehouse each day, many will be part of a corporate group (this week they include groups from Canva and Universal) that pays for the experience as part of its corporate responsibility program.

Doing more: from top, Halas; furniture made from recycled fabric; Alec Dean; Anthony Chesler

It's a big logistical operation – organising volunteers, sorting out the gear and sending it out – but the needy beneficiaries are never far from Halas's thoughts. "Over the years there have just been so many, I couldn't tell you one person," she says. A moment later, she recalls one of the first cases. "She was a victim of domestic violence. She came to us with nothing. Broken jaw, broken everything, police, five kids." Halas helped the family get back on its feet with new clothing for each of them. She's happy there has been a positive outcome since she first met this woman: "Now she has retrained and is an Aboriginal health care worker."

She recalls a recent recipient, a man released from jail, who returned to volunteer for Thread Together two weeks after receiving clothing. "He said when he left jail he was given his little garbage bag with the suit he had worn into jail 10 years ago. He didn't have a phone or anything, and he arrived at the shelter and there was a box for him with fresh underwear, pants, shirt, shoes, all in his size. And he said it just meant so much, it meant he could change into something so he could go to the shopping centre to buy a phone."

Last year refugees from Afghanistan needed their help; this year they're coming from Ukraine.

A temporary hub in Melbourne's Essendon has been set up to help them. Schools might organise clothing for disadvantaged students, or a scholarship student might need an occasion dress and heels for her school formal. "The volunteers love to pull those outfits together," says Chesler.

Alec Dean recalls how the charity helped him, first as a client to now as a full-time employee, one of only eight full- and part-time employees. "There were years of drug abuse, homelessness and whatnot," he says. "I've lived a nomadic life, spent years on commercial fishing boats. I never really found where I belonged." Sent to a Thread Together shop by his case worker, he found nothing available on the day in his size but was assured by the store manager, Kat, that if he came back in a couple of days there would be some pieces waiting for him.

Just after this, at a low point when Covid started, Dean attempted to take his own life. He ended up in hospital for three months. Upon his release, "I randomly went in there one day and she said, 'I've got all this stuff for you.' She'd made the effort [to find the clothing] and to hold onto it for three months while I was in hospital. It was that feeling like I was not given up on."

After he volunteered at the warehouse, Halas and Chesler offered Dean a full-time role in August 2020 in charge of warehouse logistics. He has also helped to set up four Thread Together stores, most recently in Hobart. But it was a temporary outlet in Sydney's Darlinghurst that demonstrated how far he had come since his nights sleeping rough. "Setting up the Oxford Street store, I realised I used to sleep in that doorway." Today, he feels like he belongs. "I feel content. This is where I'm meant to be."

Natural disasters had never factored in the original remit for Thread Together, but that all changed with the bushfires of January 2020.

While Halas appreciates that people around Australia wanted to help in their own way, sometimes donating their own used clothing, she says that this often comes with its own problems. "People mean well, but it's really inefficient in a time of crisis for people just to give stuff that's not necessarily needed. The effort to sort through all of that, it's not what you need in a time of crisis. What you need is: 1000 pairs of underwear. We need socks, pyjamas. It's efficiency – you send it to the volunteers, they set it all up and it's there."

The floods followed, and Lismore still looms large. A pop-up shop set up for the community at the local showgrounds in March was itself inundated in the second floods the following month. Thread Together had to work directly with local residents to distribute clothing to those in need and those locals, from dairy workers to retail staff, now work in the store.

It has raised another question for Halas and her team. "At board meetings, trying to work out our targets, we don't know if we should put in that we are going to have two natural disasters a year. Is this the last flood? Or are we going to have floods and fires every year? I don't know."

Anthony Chesler is holding a colourful marble-effect tile made of plastic. "This is where we're going," he says. "Making this product with excess fabric." A couple of prototype slot-together stools made from the same material are kicking around the office, and look like they came from a cool design store. The plan is to use sheets of this new material for shelving in the wardrobe units at the women's shelters; later they hope to build whole wardrobes out of it. "And then we'll encourage retailers to [use] this product as their fittings and fixtures in their stores," says Chesler. "It's the excess of the excess."

Halas and Chesler now see the future of Thread Together as creators of solutions for fashion's waste more broadly. They're not interested in building the infrastructure themselves; being small and nimble suits their ability to respond to unfolding situations. Instead, in the same way that they partner with charities and fashion brands, they are collaborating with technology and recycling companies such as Worn Up, which makes the plastic sheeting from polyester clothing. Other partners could turn cotton clothing into recycled yarns. Mixed fabrics are more difficult to deal with, but there are recycling companies working on these solutions. With the global fashion industry grappling with the issue of fashion waste, there is currently, to their knowledge, no other organisation like Thread Together in the world.

They have been approached by groups in New Zealand and the US about starting up there. "We've got our template of how to do it," says Halas. "You can see it's operated like a business. The thing is finding the right partner to do it with and really handing it over to them. We can't be everywhere and be everything."

For Halas, naivety at the beginning may have been a saving grace – otherwise the task at hand may have seemed insurmountable. Looking back at the past 10 years of the initiative, "I did know there was excess stock; I didn't know how much. I did know there were people in need; I didn't realise how many. I thought that we would be doing what we're doing, just not at the scale that we're doing it. I thought we would be working with a few social service agencies and a few fashion companies around the country to provide people with dignity to make sure the clothing didn't go in landfill, to make sure it went on the backs of people. Which, in itself, was an ambition.

"But you can't stand in that warehouse and think, 'I'm doing enough'. You can't stand in Lismore and have people come through and think, 'I'm doing enough'. You've just got to keep doing more." ●