

THE LITTLE GUYS

By Bill Schapiro, President, Whitehouse and Schapiro
SMART Immediate Past President

I wish all those involved in our industry, not to mention members of Congress and the Senate, were required to read Pietra Rivoli's homage to free trade, "The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy." I am proud to say that we SMART members are the heroes of a great story, brilliantly told.

The life of a T- shirt, from manufacture to disposal, is the device Rivoli employs to illustrate not only the economic power of free markets, but the moral case for free trade as well. She quotes former Secretary of State Cordell Hull: "If we could increase commercial exchanges among nations over lowered trade barriers, and removed international obstacles to trade, we would go a long way to eliminating war."

Within the textile industry, and among industries in general, ours is one of the very few that plays by the rules of the free market.

Rivoli writes "The clothing recyclers are on their own, without help, or even notice, from governments or lobbyists. There are no walls to keep the lions out, so successful players in the used clothing trade have no choice but to compete by punching rather than ducking, and each survives only by excelling in an exhausting race of faster, better, cheaper, with hundreds of competitors, a race that leaves little time for politics...it is hard to see how a multi-national could pull it off."

There is more poetry: "The notion that global trade is about powerful corporations peopled with well-tailored Vice Presidents is belied by the reality of used clothing exporters who are from Brooklyn, Brownsville, Pakistan and India, in short from Main Street rather than K Street or Wall Street...They represent a heartening parable about economic democracy...and do so without the walls that protect their peers in many other industries."

My favorite part of the following quote will come in capital letters: "Anyone with a bale is allowed to play, everyone must keep their eyes on the markets and attend to numerous fluid relationships with customers and suppliers, and competitors. The used clothing industry is a marvel to watch...HERE IS FINALLY A GLOBAL INDUSTRY FOR THE LITTLE GUY.!"

Rivoli points out SMART's role in advocating against bans of used clothing, and in publicizing the strong environmental story" our industry tells. She concludes that "here is ...a business mostly unheard of and largely ignored, whose promise lies in the simple matter of a compelling economic logic."

Rivoli's provocative words make it clear that we are part of an exemplary "global industry for the little guy" and that we "little guys" should do all we can to support our great trade association whose dedicated board is committed to getting our compelling story told to the world.



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