

Joyce Jagger, The Embroidery Coach Works With Donna Zahn  
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The Embroidery Coach team:  
Jennifer Grausgruber, Joyce Jagger and David Jagger

# CAN THIS EMBROIDERY SHOP BE SAVED?

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1. Donna Zahn, owner of Orcas Island Custom Embroidery, changes thread colors at The Embroidery Coach's training center.  
 2. Joyce Jagger had this cowboy design redigitized so it would give Zahn fewer production problems.  
 3. Jagger shows Zahn how to use a steamer to turn water-soluble topping into a ball, which can be used to remove excess topping from garments.  
 4. Jennifer Grausgruber consults with Zahn to create marketing materials.  
 5. Zahn was amazed at how quickly the new cowboy design sewed out, pictured here with the photo it's based off.

Donna Zahn traveled cross-country from a remote island off the coast of Washington to meet **The Embroidery Coach** on her home turf in upstate New York for three days of intensive training.

**By Theresa Hegel**  
**Photography: AJ Cass**

**B**y the time Donna Zahn arrives in upstate New York in early May, she's exhausted. After working a string of late nights, the owner of a one-woman embroidery shop on the remote Orcas Island, WA, spent the better part of the week in transit, hopping a ferry, bus and multiple planes, on a professional pilgrimage to meet Joyce Jagger, The Embroidery Coach. The only problem? "We're a decaf house. That's what happens when you get older," says the 78-year-old Jagger, as she invites the jetlagged Zahn into her modest ranch home in Binghamton.

Still, Zahn accepts a steaming mug of decaffeinated tea eagerly, ready to soak up all the knowledge she can in three days of what Jagger is calling "embroidery business boot camp." Zahn needs all the help she can get. She has what should be a lucrative niche, selling scads of mostly

## SHOP MAKEOVER

humpback whale- and orca-themed embroidery to a loyal customer base, which then resells the decorated apparel to summer tourists at a heavy markup. But despite working 20-hour days, seven days a week to keep up with demand during the busy season, Zahn's not turning a profit. "I went to Joyce because I was considering quitting," Zahn admits. "The people nearest to me were telling me I needed to close my business because I wasn't making enough money."

Zahn expected to hear the same advice from Jagger, but The Embroidery Coach doesn't know the meaning of the word quit. Zahn's business, Sew N Sew Custom Embroidery, has all the elements of a successful shop, Jagger says; Zahn just needs to make some tweaks to her processes, planning and prices.

First things first: the name needs to go. "That's like the little old lady in the basement," Jagger says, as she looks at the Sew N Sew logo, which features a grinning cartoon character with a button head, thread spool torso and measuring tape legs. "That definitely looks like alterations to me. You're not an alterations lady. We need to come up with a classier name for you."

After some brainstorming, the pair settles on Orcas Island Custom Embroidery. "The length of the name is not important, as long as it's something that can be remembered," Jagger says. The next step is creating an easily digitized logo to go with the classed-up name. That's where Jagger's personal assistant Jennifer Grausgruber comes in. A sort of Jen-of-all-trades who handles everything from lunch prep to graphic design, Grausgruber has been part of the Embroidery Coach team for two years. "She used to work for one of my customers, and I said if you ever want to leave, give me a call," Jagger explains. "She did, and I just about had a heart attack because I wasn't ready to hire someone, but I wasn't about to let her slip away. I couldn't even run the business anymore without her."

Grausgruber leads Zahn to a bedroom that's been converted into an office and starts mocking up logo possibilities for the newly minted Orcas



Joyce Jagger works with Donna Zahn in Jagger's Binghamton, NY, training center.

Island Custom Embroidery. They're curving text around a blue silhouette of Orcas Island, when Jagger pops her head in to nix their initial font choice. "I hate it. ... You need to use a font that's easy to embroider," she says, adding that sans serifs are preferable.

"I use Comic Sans a lot," Zahn suggests, and Grausgruber shudders.

"No, no, it's for children and uneducated people, of which you are neither," Grausgruber says.

Once the new logo is ready to be sent out for digitizing, Grausgruber starts working on a marketing brochure for Orcas Island Custom Embroidery and sends Zahn to the basement for the next leg of boot camp.

**F**ORMERLY A REC ROOM, JAGGER'S BASEMENT NOW HOUSES TWO SINGLE-HEAD EMBROIDERY MACHINES, a hooping station and several long prep tables. Framed monograms and other embroidery samples adorn the walls. Atop thread-filled filing cabinets sit treasures from Jagger's past, including a pillow featuring an autographed portrait of NASCAR legend Richard Petty, which Jagger embroidered freeform decades ago.

Set out on one of the tables is an array of apparel blanks Zahn lugged from the Pacific Northwest: stiff blue caps that have been giving her problems, a cozy fleece to embroider her new logo on, a stiff square of canvas a client wants her to turn into embroidered art. For the remainder of embroidery boot camp, Jagger and her son David, aka the "Cap King," share practical and time-saving tips on hooping, changing thread colors, editing embroidery designs and more. David, meticulous and soft-spoken with several decades of production experience under his belt, has been assisting his mother with her coaching business for several years. The mother and son have different teaching styles and different ideas about how to get a job done – and sometimes bicker about those differences – but at the end of the day, there's no one Joyce would rather have furthering her embroidery coaching legacy. "When it comes to quality, he's 10 times more particular than I am," she says of her son. Plus, "He's good with people. He has the patience of Job."

The Jagers help Zahn troubleshoot why caps have been giving her so many issues, walking her through the design and production process of a particularly pesky embroidery design: a stitch-heavy rendition of a cowboy on a horse, digitized faithfully from a client's photo. The first problem is the stitch density. "You don't need as much density on hats as you do garments," David says. On the first day of Zahn's visit, Joyce sent

### Improve Your Embroidery Quality

Try these tips from The Embroidery Coach team:

- **Use the right backing.** "There's a stupid saying I can't stand: 'If you wear it, don't tear it.' Absolutely not," says Joyce Jagger. You should use tearaway backing on wovens, because it won't shrink in the wash like cutaway does. Use cutaway on knits. For performance fabrics, use a no-show backing and a layer of tearaway. And never settle for the cheap stuff, Jagger adds.

- **Choose the proper needle.** For general applications, Jagger recommends 70/10 needles, rather than the 75/11 size that typically come with an embroidery machine. Ballpoint needles work well for knits and fine fabrics, and sharps are good for most wovens.

- **Invest in good trimming scissors.** David Jagger recommends curved-tip trimming scissors, so the sharp ends don't pierce the fabric. "They last a long time, you can get them sharpened and they come in different lengths," he says. "If you get cheap ones, you're always tossing them."

- **Steam it before you send it.** Your embroidery isn't finished if you haven't steamed out the hoop marks, Joyce says. "If you lay a garment upside down over a towel and press it, it'll let out the wrinkles around the design, and the embroidery will sink into the towel," she adds. "It makes it pop out and look really good."

## ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

Head to [ASICentral.com](http://ASICentral.com) to learn more about how Joyce Jagger helped Donna Zahn.



### SLIDESHOW: A Session With the Embroidery Coach

Donna Zahn, owner of Orcas Island Custom Embroidery, spent three days working with Joyce Jagger and Jagger's son David. Check out some pictorial highlights from her session at The Embroidery Coach's training center in Binghamton, NY: [bit.ly/ZahnPhotos](http://bit.ly/ZahnPhotos).



### VIDEO: Zahn Reflects on Training

On the last day of her training session with The Embroidery Coach, Zahn shares some of the biggest lessons she learned and what she's most excited to implement at her shop. Watch the video here: [bit.ly/ZahnVideo](http://bit.ly/ZahnVideo).



### VIDEO: Embroidery Coach Expands Training Empire

Jagger is always offering new training and education opportunities for her students. In this video, she shares details on her new embroidery certification program and other initiatives she's planned for her business. Watch it here: [bit.ly/EmbroideryTraining](http://bit.ly/EmbroideryTraining).

the design to her personal digitizer, who reprogrammed the cowboy with fewer colors and less detail. David helps Zahn hoop the cap, and then center it under the machine using a paper template. "I generally try to center them between the eyelets and the brim," he says.

As the revised cowboy design sews out, David shares some tips for hat embroidery: When hooping, use hat clips, especially if you're sewing on the side of a cap, since it'll give you better registration; stick with a more versatile size 11 needle for caps; keep your designs no higher than 2.25 inches for the best results; embroider your hats at no more than 600 stitches per minute. In exactly nine minutes, the cowboy design is done, and Zahn is amazed. "The old design took 46 minutes to sew," she says. "That just saved me almost an hour."

On the final day of in-person training, the Jagers have Zahn go through a mock order, from unpacking an apparel blank to steaming off the hoop marks and everything in between. Joyce times the process every step of the way. "It cost you \$18.66 to do that shirt," she says, as Zahn is finishing up.

"Is that good?" Zahn asks.

**“I went to Joyce Jagger because I was considering quitting. The people nearest to me were telling me I needed to close my business because I wasn't making enough money.”**

Donna Zahn, Orcas Island Custom Embroidery

"I wouldn't say it's good," Joyce says, though she adds that for a single piece, with a \$25 minimum charge, it's not too bad. But to surpass the \$40 per hour breakeven point Joyce has calculated for Orcas Island Custom Embroidery, Zahn will have to focus on smart scheduling and streamlining her production process. She'll also need to raise her prices roughly three times higher. Still, as Zahn prepares for the long journey home, exchanging tearful hugs with the Jagers and Grausgruber, she's more optimistic than she's been in a long time. Armed with a new logo, brochure, pricelist and paperwork – not to mention a lifetime membership to the Embroidery Coach website – Zahn is ready to succeed.

**T**HREE MONTHS LATER, THINGS ARE GOING WELL FOR ZAHN. "Here I thought I was done, and I was just getting started," she says. The boot camp experience "lit a fire under me that I can't say I've had before." She's upped the quality of her work by using the right backing and embroidery needles. She's raised her prices. And she's been using the Jagers' organizational system to fill out daily and weekly schedules to help production flow smoothly, even during the hectic summer season. Despite a heavy workload, Zahn hasn't been stressed out, and has even been able to schedule in some time for fun. "It's amazing when you start keeping track of what you're doing, how much time you gain back," she says. Zahn has also landed some regular contract work to keep the machines running through the winter.

Customers have noticed the positive changes in Zahn's work and demeanor. "They even said, 'It's about time you raised your prices,'" she laughs.

Joyce views Zahn as a star pupil: "She has just come along leaps and bounds. ... She's taken the whole process and run with it."

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