Eileen Fisher: Designer of the Year

Waste No More, Vision 2020 and Women Together are three of the company’s key initiatives.

Five years ago, when Eileen Fisher was celebrating 30 years in business, she was interviewed about her career. She said she wasn’t looking for any accolades from the fashion industry. “I don’t care about that. It’s not what I do or why I do it. I’ve always been about real clothes that really work for real life. It’s not an art project for me. It’s real design, vision, solving problems — that’s what fascinates me,” she told WWD.

Fast forward five years and, although Fisher is proud to win Designer of the Year from the AAFA, it’s not what she’s about.

“It’s weird, it’s a little strange,” Fisher said. “I’m always like, wait a minute, ‘Who am I? What am I doing? What’s interesting here?’ But I’m honored, and I appreciate it, and I’m honored for all the people of my company. I get beyond me. What am I doing? I’m just doing my best every day, but I guess that’s good enough.”

For the past 35 years, Fisher has created an enviable $450 million apparel company that’s a leader in the sustainability movement. Her products are sold in more than 300 department and specialty stores across the U.S., U.K. and Canada, 65 Eileen Fisher stores, two Renew stores, which are part of the company’s take-back program. In 2016, Fisher’s company became one of the largest women’s fashion companies to be certified a B Corp., which means you care about things beyond just profit, she said. “You work for the greater good, you measure your environmental and social impacts.”

In 2015, Fisher set out to become a completely sustainable company and launched Vision 2020.
"We're on a really good track," Fisher said. "We're trying to get all of our materials to 100 percent Eco-Preferred by 2020. That's one of our big goals because we identified the materials as the area where most of our damage is created, and we try to make change. We're almost at 100 percent organic cotton and organic linen, and we're changing all of our rayons to Tencel and close-looped technology. Lots of our silks and linens are sustainably dyed. There's always some impact on the environment, nothing's perfect," she said.

One of Fisher's programs is called Waste No More, a zero-waste movement and philosophy of creating a whole circular process for its clothing. "We take our clothes back, Renew is the first step for a second life for the clothes. We clean what we can and we resell. What we can't resell, we're remaking into all kinds of amazing things." Fisher has a 20,000-square-foot factory near company headquarters in Irvington, N.Y., called The Tiny Factory, where they are remaking the clothes. This month, the company showed its recycled clothing at its Brooklyn store and in Milan at Salon Del Mobile.

Another interesting initiative for the company is called Women Together (formerly Lifework), which is an empowerment program for women about self-awareness and connection. Fisher hosts these one-day mini retreats to help women connect with themselves and connect with other women. "I'm a big believer that women are going to change the fashion industry and change the world," she said.

 Asked in what ways the company has become a force for change, Fisher replied, "We try hard. We keep trying. We make clothes that are simple. We work on how we make the clothes and we work together. We try to role model sustainable practices and simple clothes that last a long time. You don't have to waste. The whole circular model that you can bring the clothes back. We do something amazing with this big waste program and making our design pieces out of that. Also, our work with women. We see ourselves as more than a business," she said.