

Moths ate the clothes you stashed away during the pandemic, so this Boston weaver is busier than ever

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 6, 2021, 4:55 p.m.



Before and after swatches of Toni Columbo's handiwork. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Toni Columbo has been mending damaged clothing for more than four decades. Now that workers are trickling back to the office and people are going out again, the third-generation reweaver has never been busier.

Columbo, who owns [Invisible Reweaving](#) in Boston, said customers are streaming in

with business attire riddled with moth holes after being stashed in the backs of closets for the past year.

“When people bring in something, it’s usually just like one or two holes,” Columbo said. “But now we’re seeing things that are insane. They look like Swiss cheese.”

Those who could work remotely traded suits for sweats as the pandemic rolled on. Moths feasted freely on garments left in the dark corners of closets. By the time folks pulled them out, some were beyond repair.

The most common victims: suits, sweaters, and coats.

Working out of an apartment complex in Charlestown, Columbo fixes rips, burns, and holes. For several months, she said, business has been skyrocketing.

To ensure a perfect match when fixing holes, Columbo harvests thread or yarn from an inconspicuous spot on the garment, like the hem of the pants. The time it takes to reweave each article of clothing varies widely, she said, because every job is different.

Working under high-intensity lights with a latch hook needle in hand, she weaves to create new fabric over the hole until any hint of damage disappears.



Toni Columbo reweaves moth-damaged wool clothing. With a surgeon's loupe to magnify her work, she weaves whatever wool pattern a garment has to produce seamless, invisible repairs. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Her family — Columbo, her mother, and her two sisters — started the business on Broad Street in downtown Boston in 1981. It relocated to the North End before Columbo, who is the only family member still involved, moved it to a Charlestown apartment complex in 2016.

Over the years, its clientele has included the late Julia Child, actor John Malkovich, and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. Columbo has also worked on baseball jerseys formerly worn by Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio.

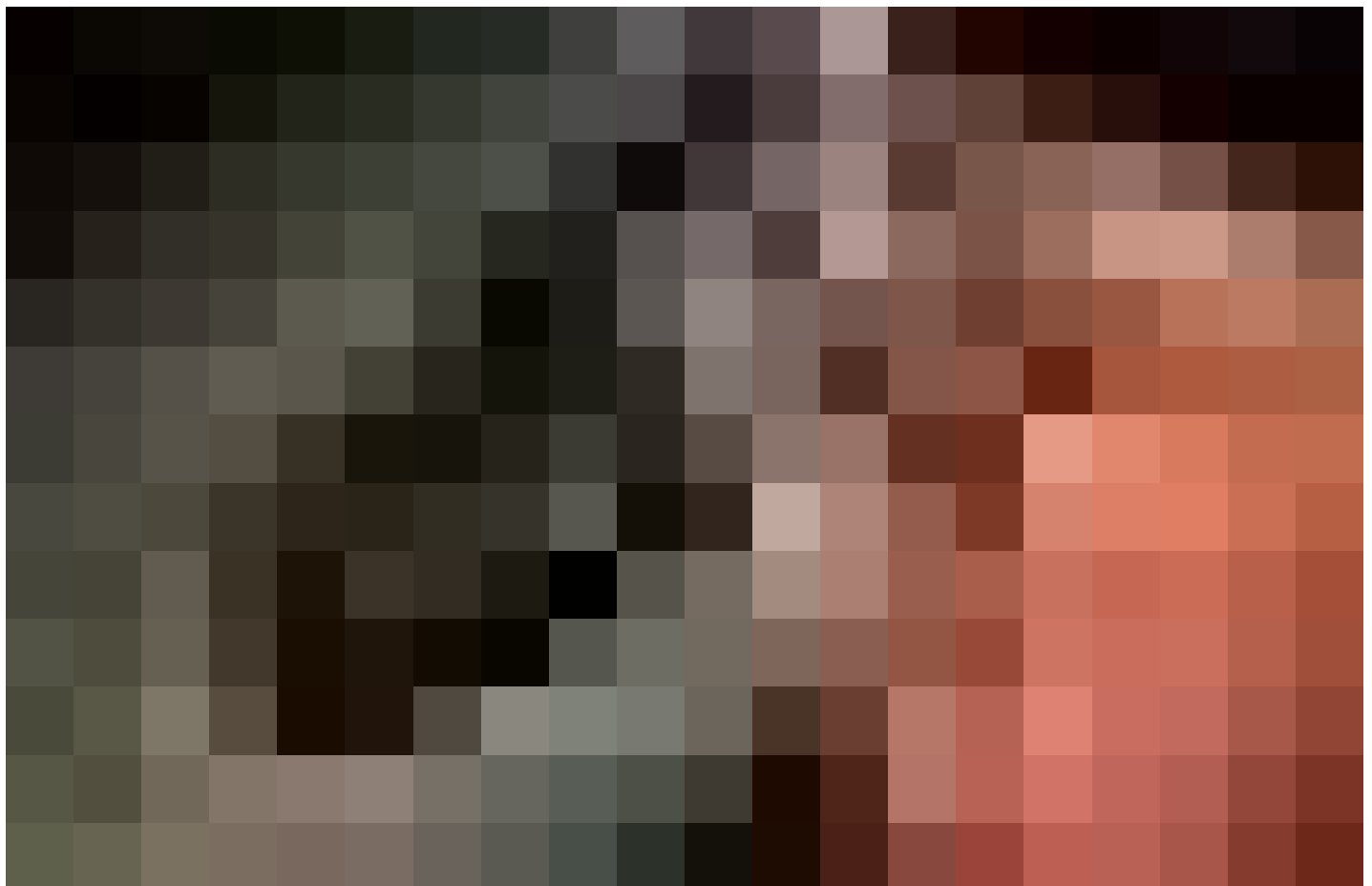
Charlie Mueller, a retiree of three years and a recent customer, hadn't touched his "incredibly soft" cashmere sport coat in about two years. Before the pandemic, he would typically wear it out to dinner.

“That coat had many more holes than any that I’ve ever experienced with moths,” Mueller said. “It was an expensive one. But beyond the expense, it was just one of my favorites.”

He brought the coat to Columbo, whom he has relied on to mend moth holes in his clothing for the past 25 years.

“You know, they never go for that bunch of clothes you’ve been meaning to give to the Salvation Army,” Columbo said. “They always go really for your finest woolens. They can have exquisite taste.”

Clothes moths need natural fibers to survive, said Doug Fleischer, managing partner of the Boston pest control company Pestex Inc. They tend to go after keratin-based fibers such as wool, a popular material for men’s suits.



Toni Columbo uses a loupe to magnify her work. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Beyond the fibers they choose, moths have a particular preference for natural colors,

Columbo said. One suit she recently worked on was navy blue with tan chalk stripes.

“They only ate the tan part,” said Ted Grant, who brought the suit to Columbo.

Grant, publisher of The Daily Item in Lynn, said he has found holes in more than 10 pieces of clothing since he began “dressing like an adult” again. After switching out his usual work attire for more casual clothes, Grant didn’t touch his suits for six to eight months.

The damage was apparent, he said, as soon as he pulled on a pair of pants. He would find several holes in various pairs of trousers, though his suit jackets were unscathed.

“I’m sure even if I was taking something on and off the rack, it probably would have been enough to scare them off,” Grant said. “And I don’t know if it was one hungry moth or if it was 200 moths. I never even saw them.”



Toni Columbo pins her repairs into place. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Grant said he hired an exterminator who was able to point out traces of moth activity — but never discovered the culprits.

Until recently, he hadn't visited Columbo for about 20 years, when he last found moth holes in one of his jackets.

“I just happened to have kept her phone number all those years,” he said. “Much to my surprise, she was still doing it.”

Columbo has been weaving, knitting, and crocheting since childhood. The trade runs in her family: Her mother and grandmother taught her the craft. Then, she continued to study fibers in school, in Massachusetts and Italy, before returning to work in Boston.

“That’s all I do. I’m not a seamstress, I’m not a tailor, I just do invisible reweaving and invisible reknitting,” Columbo said. “It’s something that really not a lot of people are doing anymore. I think there may be just a handful of us left in the country.”

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