



Marilyn Smolenski uses a mock gun to demonstrate how to pull a handgun out of the concealed carry clothing she designs.



Anna Taylor, founder and CEO of Dene Adams LLC, displays a corset that allows for the concealed carrying of a firearm in Atlanta, Ga.

Women buying FIREARMS creates concealed carry fashion market

Does this gun make me look fat? For decades, women have had few choices when it comes to the clothing they can wear to hide that they're carrying a firearm. They could wear baggy T-shirts or coats, or put it in a purse and hope it didn't get swiped or that they didn't have trouble getting it out in an emergency. Enter holsters, corsets, camisoles and other clothing designed to be flattering, feminine - and functional - for the pistol-packing' mama crowd." I don't want to dress in tactical gear and camo all the time. I love tactical clothing for the range. It's comfortable. I don't want to ruin my everyday clothing," said Marilyn Smolenski, who in 2012 created Nickel and Lace, a company that caters to women who want to carry a firearm concealed but don't want to trade in their femininity. "But I don't want to wear it to the grocery store."

Smolenski started her company right around the time when Chicago city laws changed and she could again legally carry a firearm. When that happened, she struggled to find something that didn't make her look frumpy and didn't broadcast that she was packing heat. Most of the clothing was geared to men - coats with hidden pockets, or holsters that tucked neatly inside a waistband. But until the last few years, those weren't always great options for women who don't wear belts as frequently and are more likely than men to wear form-fitting clothing, making it difficult to hide the fact they're carrying a firearm.

Men and women

"When you put a man's holster on a woman's body it sticks out. It doesn't hug the body," said Carrie Lightfoot, founder and owner of The Well Armed Woman in Scottsdale, Arizona, which does everything from providing firearms instruction to women to selling a variety of concealed carry clothing. One of her company's first missions was to design and produce a holster that recognized the differences in body types and clothing styles between men and women. Women's waists tend to be shorter, providing less room to withdraw a gun from a holster. Hips and chests can get in the way too, she said.

Lightfoot and Smolenski said that some manufacturers tended to "shrink it and pink it" - thinking that taking gear produced for men and making it smaller and brightly colored would



Anna Taylor, founder and CEO of Dene Adams LLC, displays a corset that allows for the concealed carrying of a firearm in Atlanta, Ga.

satisfy female customers. They and their counterparts emphasize they are driven first by function and safety before aesthetics come into the equation. "Women need to know they can carry effectively," Lightfoot said. "I think the key is finding a way to carry it so you can be comfortable and move through your day without being poked and having a big hunk of metal in your pants and not be able to sit at work."

Personal safety

Both also are advocates for providing women with information and guidance on ways to feel secure and be safe. For Smolenski, that goal has led to the creation of the annual Firearms and Fashion Show which includes seminars on personal safety. Her company actually got its start

with a line of jewelry - from necklaces that can be pulled away easily and then used as a weapon to "chopsticks" that can both be used to hold up hair and then be wielded against an attacker. For Anna Taylor, the founder and CEO of Dene Adams LLC - named after her grandfather, who first taught her to respect firearms and handle them safely - the road to creating a line of concealed carry clothing began at around the time she became a single mom and the safety of the family rested on her shoulders. When she got her first concealed carry permit in 2013, she went through seven different holsters.

Solid black

"Some were hard and uncomfortable. Some of them I'd have to take off and set down when I

went to the bathroom and I was afraid I would go off and leave it just like I've left my phone behind before. Others, belly band types with a print so bad you could see the grip or outline of the gun through my clothes," Adams said. "So when I went out in public, I felt like I had these awkward arms always trying to hide this thing." Her first design involved a mousepad and a post-partem corset to create a soft holster.

She was able to carry the kids around, nurse, give the kids baths - even jump on the trampoline - "and I could forget that it was there." With her last \$200, she found a manufacturer willing



Marilyn Smolenski uses a mock gun to demonstrate how to pull a handgun out of the concealed carry clothing she designs.

to do a small run. Flash forward three years and she now has products on shelves at nearly 100 dealers around the country. She has expanded into safety and training and is now an NRA pistol and rifle instructor. She even has a few men who buy her products - including, she said, air marshals, who gravitate to the snug, comfortable designs. "We have options that don't have lace. We have solid black," she said. — AP