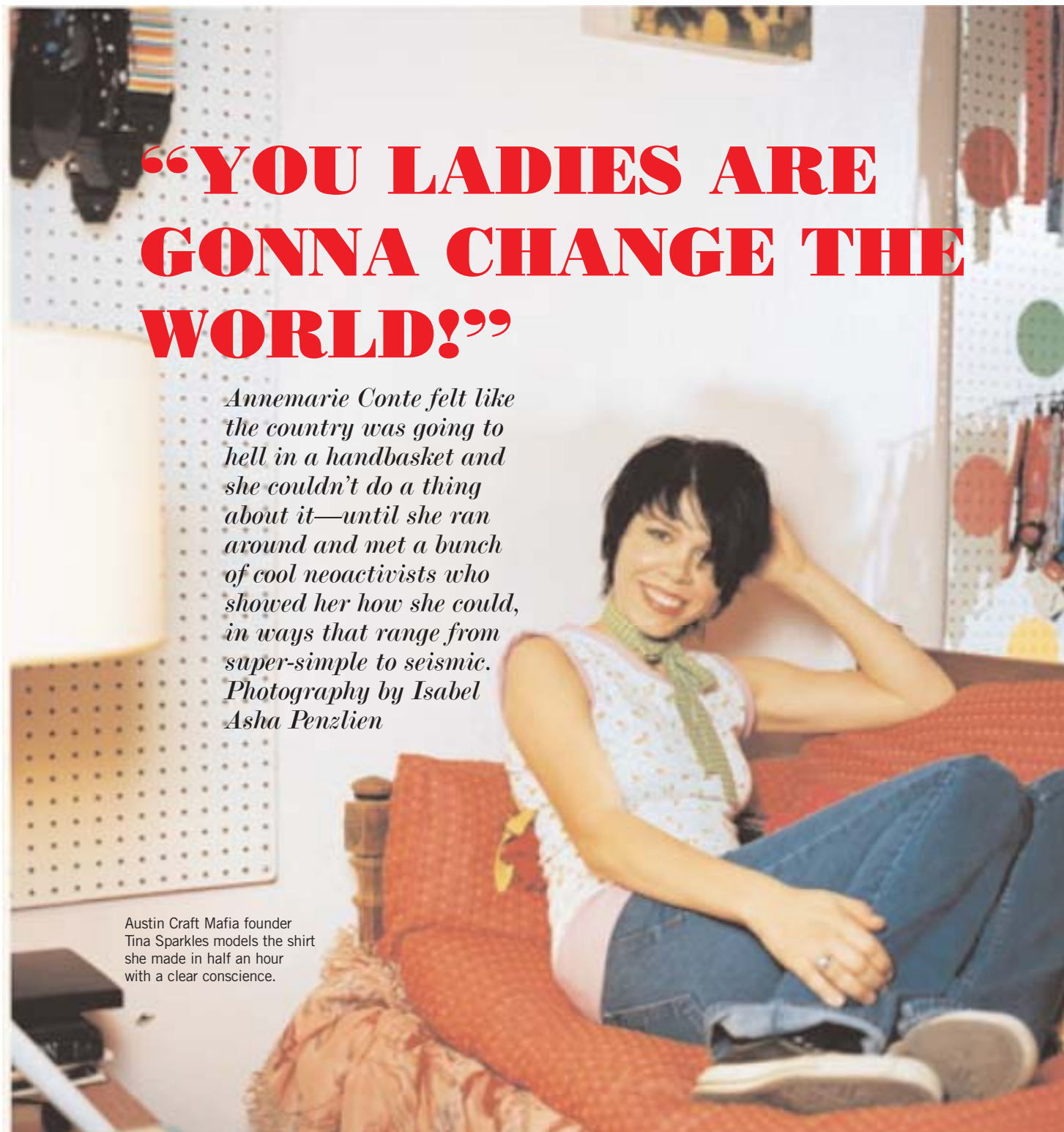


# “YOU LADIES ARE GONNA CHANGE THE WORLD!”

*Annemarie Conte felt like the country was going to hell in a handbasket and she couldn't do a thing about it—until she ran around and met a bunch of cool neoactivists who showed her how she could, in ways that range from super-simple to seismic. Photography by Isabel Asha Penzlien*

Austin Craft Mafia founder Tina Sparkles models the shirt she made in half an hour with a clear conscience.



**F**irst stop: Austin, Texas, where Tina teaches me how to make sweatshop-free clothing that doesn't look like a hemp sack

Tina Sparkles, 29, glances at her frayed Chuck Taylors and frowns. “I usually wear them until they fall apart,” she says, poking at the holes. “But I’m not sure what I’m going to do now that they’re owned by a huge corporation—there’s debate over their employment practices. Maybe I can get them used. I like them, so it’s hard.” Four years ago, after struggling with her conscience about buying clothes manufactured abroad, Tina decided she would support only companies that pay their employees a living wage. At the same time, she taught herself

to sew and founded the Austin company Sparkle Craft, making accessories like guitar straps and belts and recently expanding to colorful shirts, frilly skirts and dresses. Her stuff is so girly and fun that when I caress a rack of her belts, I want to grab them all and run away. But I refrain because she’s promised to show me how easy it can be to make a shirt of my very own.

As I sit on a comfy couch in her cozy pink-walled studio, Tina tells me that she changed her name to Tina Sparkles, based on a character in *Strictly Ballroom*. The Austin Craft Mafia—a group of nine businesswomen, which she helped found—was recently approached to host *Styleicious*, a cooking-show-style crafts extravaganza on the DIY Network,

Once we arrive at Chicago Food, we head straight for the produce section. Jes points out the difficulty of keeping a public blog. “People have flamed me for shopping here because it’s large, and they say it puts smaller Asian groceries out of business. I’m like, ‘Yeah, but there’s only one of them. It’s not a chain.’ You can’t make everyone happy,” she says, scanning a mountain of gleaming bok choy. We snap up gorgeous ingredients, like limes for 5 cents each and a package of firm tofu for 69 cents. Jes does a quick price comparison. “The limes would be 10 cents and the tofu would be \$2 at the Mexican market,” she says. “But their broccoli is usually good—the selection here looks a little deflated—so we’ll stop there on the way back.”



“So the key is knowing your options and keeping a mental list of prices,” I pipe up, feeling like a teacher’s pet as Jes nods in agreement.

Local shopping doesn’t take all that much extra effort, and it’s what housewives around the world have been doing for centuries. Jes may have more freedom than most of us because she works from home as a technical writer for a software company, but when she first started the site, she was a cubicle drone, just like so many of us. The only difference is that she’d take a few minutes out of her commute home to buy ingredients, then cook *before* going out to get bombed with her friends.

We return to her apartment, and I begin unpacking bags. “I have a bachelor’s fridge,” she says, gesturing to the carton of soy milk and various condiments that live inside. At first, this is really surprising, but since Jes bases most of her meals on perishables, it makes sense. Although she includes a lot of unusual ingredients, she isn’t much of a cook. So she’s perfected easy basics like stir-fries and stews, usually making a big pot of something on Monday and adding fresh veggies as the week goes on.

Our dinner takes about 20 minutes to cook and consists of vegetables like daikon and Italian black kale, plus plenty of seasonings—hot bean paste, miso, paprika and cinnamon (“my secret ingredient,” she says). The whole shebang is served over black rice. And though Jes insists that this lifestyle is all about balance, and sometimes groceries can be more expensive from indie stores and farmers markets, our delicious, easy meal with tons of leftovers cost just \$6.05. The same ingredients from a major chain would have cost us \$13.09 (with wild rice—the big guys don’t stock black rice).

All told, Jes spends about \$80 a month on groceries. During the winter, when farmers markets are scarce, she spends \$20 per month to receive seasonal, farm-fresh produce through a national organization called Community Supported Agriculture. “You can end up with a box of just potatoes, so you have to be careful about which CSA you join,” she warns.

### Now off to Arlington, Va., where Alice rents her second home for below-market value to keep the town from looking like Pleasantville

When my landlord put my apartment up for sale and my roommates and I started desperately searching for another place, we quickly understood the cold reality of gentrification. If we, four professional women who work in Manhattan, were being priced out of our wonderful, diverse, family-friendly-yet-fun neighborhood in New Jersey, what’s happening to the people who have double the dependents and half the income? Just because landlords can get \$1,200 a month for a studio apartment doesn’t mean they should. Which is why I instantly admire Alice Hogan, 35, and her data analyst husband, Bob Boucher, for not being greedy. Alice, who has a master’s in social work and left her job at the federal government’s affordable-housing arm when she had her first child, wanted to “walk the talk,” as she says.

Alice bought her Arlington condo in a soft market—there were more sellers than buyers, so she got a great deal. “The rent pays for the mortgage, the condo fees and a maintenance fund, so I wanted to make it available to some



From left: Melissa Hardy, SaraHope Smith and Novella Carpenter run one of the 600 biodiesel fueling locations in the country. Find a pump near you at [www.biodiesel.org/buyingbiodiesel/retailfuelingsites](http://www.biodiesel.org/buyingbiodiesel/retailfuelingsites).

failed campaign to prevent a Starbucks from opening on campus. "Some students got together and said, 'Here's an alternative—a fair-trade, organic coffee company.' The administration let the campus vote, and the students still voted to keep Starbucks," she fumes.

That's nothing compared with what I find in northern Vermont, where Cheryl Byrne, 23, is an AmeriCorps volunteer. "I don't kiss boys who eat meat or smoke," she says, laughing. She's been a vegetarian for seven years because she doesn't like the taste or the environmental effects of meat. When she met her boyfriend, Dan, four years ago in an outdoor-education class, he ate meat and smoked socially. "He's definitely adapted for me," Cheryl continues, "but he's made it work

for him." Over time, Dan compromised and became semi-veggie—he does scarf fish and chicken wings on occasion, but doing so means he has to wait until the next day before getting any lovin'.

### **At last, the major change in Berkeley, Calif., where I help to bring down big oil**

Melissa Hardy, 29, picks me up from my hotel in her silver 2000 Volkswagen Beetle. The odd, sweet smell that permeates is the "fumes" from the V100 recycled-vegetable-oil biodiesel (that would be converted french-fry oil) she uses as fuel. You may be familiar with the biodiesel projects of eco-celebs, such as Willie Nelson's BioWillie campaign or Daryl Hannah's