

Button pusher

By Michael J. Solender

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Nikki Mueller has some words for you, Charlotte, and she's going public with her social commentary.

Mueller is poking the QC with tongue-in-very-cheeky slogans on buttons, magnets, bottle openers, mirrors and T-shirts.

Eager and quick to join in on the good-natured ribbing, residents and visitors alike are snapping up the novelty items Mueller produces by hand in her spare time. Mueller, a fulltime graphic designer with an architectural consulting firm, is founder, CEO and sole employee of the local handmade crafts producer Not Made In China.

"Shaw LIT NO Carra Lyna" proclaims one of Mueller's best selling buttons. Another notes the top three things to do in Charlotte: "Checking out Asheville, vacationing in Charleston, and shopping in Atlanta." The button that explains how Charlotteans refer to "Downtown as Uptown" also is among the locals' favorites.

Originally from San Diego, Mueller came to Charlotte seven years ago for her Teach for America job. For the last five years, she's worked in her chosen field of graphic design.

"I joined the Charlotte chapter of AIGA, a professional association for designers," said Mueller. The idea for Not Made In China was born during a "button competition" with colleagues in the association in 2009.

"We were trying to come up with giveaways for our meetings to promote Charlotte," she said. "I made almost a dozen designs and the judges selected several of mine for the promotion. I thought about the extra designs I had and was encouraged by friends to try selling them at a craft fair. When my inventory of over 100 sold out in two days, I realized I may have been onto something."

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Quick quips

Nikki Mueller spoofs cities and more.

Asheville: Higher than your average city

Things to do in Charlotte: Check out Asheville. Vacation in Charleston. Shop in Atlanta.

Charlotte: SEVEN O FO

Columbia: FINER than a frog hair split four ways

Raleigh: Like vanilla only plainer

Culinary: I got my pork pulled in North Carolina

- [Where to shop](#)

More info: www.shopnotmadeinchina.com.

Charlotte retailers: Paper Skyscraper, Common Market, Eco-licious, Park Road Books, Charlotte Visitors Center, SoBo Loft.

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Since she launched her business, Mueller has sold thousands of buttons. The buttons sell at retail for around \$1. Other novelty items, such as mirrors and magnets, sell for around \$3 and while popular, are second in sales to her buttons. Not Made In China T-shirts sell for about \$20.

Skewering neighborhoods

"There has always been a humorous side to my design," said Mueller, who says the Not Made In China name of her company is not so much a political statement as it is a reference to a renaissance she sees under way in locally produced, handmade crafts and goods.

"Designers often don't have the opportunity to see how end consumers interact with their design. By selling my products at local craft fairs and at several Charlotte retailers, I get the chance to witness firsthand how people react. It's great to see people laugh and get the jokes. Charlotte is such a town of outsiders and people from someplace else, when they feel like they are in on the joke, they really seem to enjoy that."

Ron Wooten is co-owner of the Dilworth gift and book store Paper Skyscraper, the first area retailer to carry Not Made In China's products starting in 2010.

"Every week people come into our store asking for things made locally," said Wooten. "There is a lack of Charlotte-specific items available from manufacturers. To have products like Nikki makes available for our customers is really special. Her Charlotte neighborhood series products are particularly popular."

Charlotte's most venerable neighborhoods are fair game for Not Made In China's double entendres, puns or playful jabs.

Plaza Midwood's button proclaims "Hipsters in the Ghetto."

NoDa's says it is "Home to artists, musicians and other broke people."

For Dilworthians: "I WANT TO TOUCH YOUR BUNGALOW."

All in fun

While the bulk of Mueller's designs are G-rated, several have racy double meanings and adult-oriented inside jokes. She's also not afraid to employ an occasional four-letter word (usually crossed out).



"It's all in fun. I certainly don't mean to offend anyone, though nothing is really off-limits for me," said Mueller. "It's not too difficult to come up with these as there are so many quirks about our area, many of which really stand out to newcomers."

While Mueller continues to sell at craft fairs, she's found a home for her products at retailers in Charlotte and in Asheville; Chattanooga, Tenn.; and Owensboro, Ky. She also sells online, though is keeping her scale limited for the time being.

"It's really a hobby for now," she said. "I'm not looking to outsource anything and want to keep doing this as long as I'm having fun."