

# Timeless Fashion: Made In America

*Pam Pietrowski and Paula Travers*



*What do these five presidents have in common? Ulysses S. Grant, Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, George H. Bush, and Barack Obama all wore suits made by Brooks Brothers.*

Brooks Brothers suits are famous for their high quality. When the company was first started in 1818, it made military uniforms. Soon, the company was making custom suits for U.S. presidents and others who could afford them. Today, the suits are made by workers on an assembly line who use machines as well as hand-stitching. A Brooks Brothers suit can cost more than \$2000. Most Brooks Brothers suits are made in the USA.

Today, the employees of a company called Southwick make suits for Brooks Brothers. "These workers are highly skilled," says Carl Proper, the communications director of the New England

Joint Board of UNITE/HERE, which is the union that represents the Southwick workers. "They have received specialized training so that they can produce a flawless garment."

Located in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Southwick has faced economic challenges. Recently, it was almost out of business, and it faced pressure to relocate to a country where manufacturing is much cheaper. But in 2009 the parent company of Brooks Brothers bought Southwick. This allowed its 300 workers to keep their jobs and continue to make quality suits in America.

"The owner of Brooks Brothers believes in 'Made In America,'" says Joe Antista, Chief Operating Officer who has worked with the company since the early years.

Workers in the Brooks Brothers factory in Haverhill, MA, work a nine-hour day. Southwick works with Northern Essex Community College and with Local 187 of UNITE/HERE to provide Level 1 English classes to many of its workers. During the day, each employee works diligently at one piece



*Who makes Brooks Brothers suits today? These workers do. All of them are originally from the Dominican Republic. They study English on Mondays and Wednesdays in a class supported by the company they work for, Southwick, and their union.*



The Southwick workers in the Tuesday/Thursday class are from the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and Korea.

of a coat or pants of a Brooks Brother's suit. In the afternoons, the cafeteria is transformed into a classroom with a portable dry erase board, easel and vocabulary flip chart. The employees turn in their smocks, needles, and thread for picture dictionaries and English conversation.

In the past, immigrant garment workers who made Brooks Brothers suits came from Italy or Ireland. Now they come from the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and Korea. Over the years, they have sewn millions of suits for millions of people. They sewed the coat that Abraham Lincoln was wearing when he was assassinated. They sewed the uniforms for Union officers during the Civil War. They sewed John F. Kennedy's inauguration suit and the overcoat that Barack Obama wore on his inauguration. One thing all the generations of Brooks Brothers workers have in common is their desire to take pride in their work and earn a

wage that allows them to take care of their families and move forward with their lives.

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*Pam Pietrowski and Paula Travers work for Northern Essex Community College and teach ESOL to Southwick employees who make Brooks Brothers suits.*

**Sources:** Lawrence Eagle Tribune, "Clothing maker chooses against moving overseas," March 4, 2009; <[www.lawrencehistory.org](http://www.lawrencehistory.org)>.

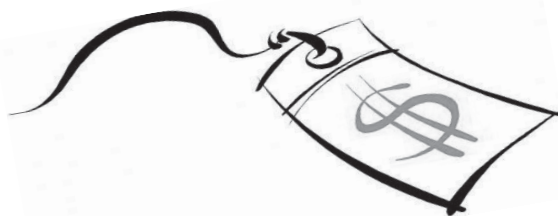
**ESOL Lesson Plan**

**For an ESOL lesson plan and worksheet (developed by Pam Pietrowski and Paula Travers) relevant to garment workers, see <[www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras](http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras)>.**

# Price Tag

by Fahmi Arie

I'm wearing designer shirts,  
expensive pants.  
I cannot pay the bill.




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*Fahmi Arie is originally from Indonesia. He is a student at the Riverside branch of the New York Public Library ESOL program.*

