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Turning Artistic Passion Into Profit

By MARNELL JAMESON, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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During the eight years Laurie Jo Phillips waitressed at Green Street restaurant in Pasadena, she dreamed of doing more with her painting. She wanted to earn her living creating painted fabric art. But like many crafters, she lacked the confidence to trade a secure livelihood for the unknown.

Although she'd been involved in art since high school and had some formal training, Phillips' painting passion remained largely nonprofit. At work one day, she shared her interest with a customer who also happened to be involved in the Montrose Arts and Crafts Fair. The customer urged Phillips to exhibit her wares--painted sweatshirts, windsocks and pillows--at the community crafts fair to see what would happen.

A few years later Phillips quit waitressing and opened a studio, which soon doubled as a retail store, Laurie Jo Designs, on the Glendale-Montrose border. "I knew if I didn't quit and give this 150%, I'd always blame the fact that I didn't make it on my job," says Phillips, who secured the lease with money borrowed from her credit card. "I had no start-up capital, no rich uncle, not even a business plan."

What she did have was stamina. She worked hard, often painting into the early morning hours. On the weekends she worked a circuit of craft shows. It took five years before she was earning what she'd made waitressing. But now, 10 years later, Phillips, 41, estimates she has tripled her waitressing salary. "I've been able to buy a condo, a new van, invest a little, and I have money to spend."

For many people, supporting themselves by doing a craft they love remains a daydream. But for those who follow that dream, many discover the rewards surpass the risks, although both are considerable.

"It's not for everyone," says Tracy Beckman, owner of Beckman's Handcrafted Gift Show, a wholesale show where crafters sell their

handmade items in major regional gift markets, including Los Angeles.

"But if you're into your craft and want to pursue a love of art, then working in the craft industry can be a great opportunity. For many that opportunity counts more than the opportunity to make a lot of money."

Plus, who can put a price on being your own boss and forging your own destiny?

From 'Dirt Poor' to Bootstrap Entrepreneur

Sheri McHenry, 53, of Cowan Heights, desperately wanted to change her destiny 18 years ago, and her craft made it possible.

McHenry was "dirt poor," living in a mobile home with two kids and an unemployed husband. She had no high school education, but she did know how to sew. One Christmas she pieced together a dozen ornaments from the rags of her kids' old clothes and stuffed them with dryer lint. She took the ornaments to a gallery in town that was selling handcrafted Christmas items.

The ornaments quickly sold out at \$8 apiece, and the store asked for more, giving rise to Snickell-doodles, McHenry's cottage business that in peak times employs as many as 150 seamstresses doing piecework in their homes. McHenry divorced, married a man who has a stained-glass business, and the two now get side-by-side booths wherever they show.

Not all crafters-turned-entrepreneurs succeed, says Beckman, who has seen many artists come and go during her 16 years in the business. She cautions amateur crafters: "Beware of the well-meaning family member who likes what you make and says, 'You should sell these. You'd make a mint.' Sometimes they're right, but as with any business, more fail than succeed. You need the right combination."

That combination comprises the right product for the right price, selling ability and good business skills.

"Raving great artistic ability doesn't mean you have great business ability--and you need both, or at least some of each," Beckman says.

Start Small and Build Experience

Beckman's advice to people who dream of making a living from crafting is to start small. Don't quit your day job; rather, work nights creating your product, then enter a small retail show. Charitable groups, churches, local art centers and even communities sponsor these.

Then branch out to a more professional retail show like the traveling Harvest Festival or the Laguna Beach Sawdust Festival, which opened earlier this month and runs through August. These are large-scale shows that jury in products, meaning show organizers screen products for quality and copyright infringement and to be sure a similar product isn't already sold in the show.

Another harsh reality is that the lifestyle can be tiring. Many crafters do shows almost every weekend, which often means traveling, and work at home all week filling orders. "It's a 24-and-7 kind of lifestyle," says Ilene Kelly of her Sherman Oaks-based Ilene Kelly Enterprises.

For those who can handle large volumes, and who want to cut down on the travel and the number of events, wholesale shows--where buyers acquire large quantities to resell in stores, shops and galleries--may prove profitable.

Here again, you have to be careful not to overextend. If you're out selling, you're not producing. You need to find the right balance so you don't oversell and under-produce, or vice versa.

Crafters-turned-professionals commonly have other blind spots. For one, they're often not realistic about how much they're earning.

"They look at how much money they bring in without considering how much their business is costing," says McHenry, who has witnessed many crafters fail. "They're not organized, so they go into debt financing their business."

They also tend to blame factors other than their product or themselves--such as a bad booth location--for their failure. "If you don't do well at a show, it's probably not the show's fault," McHenry says.

Changing With a Fickle Market

Often hot sellers stop selling because trends and markets change, and not every crafter can keep up with the times.

Ethel and Harold Hulsey of Clovis, near Fresno, were victims of a changing market. For more than 10 years, Ethel had a business making bread-dough ornaments and refrigerator magnets. The products were so hot that Harold quit truck driving for a couple of years to help. Then demand tapered off and so did their income. Harold Hulsey recently went back to

truck driving and his wife, who had worked as an industrial engineer, took a job with the post office.

"You see retirement up ahead and you've got this business making half what it used to and you have to reevaluate," says Harold Hulsey, 50. "We enjoyed it. We made a lot of friends. But crafts have phases."

Kelly, of Ilene Kelly Enterprises, has the kind of market resiliency that gives crafters longevity. A former trainer for Weight Watchers, Kelly was laid off. "I figured I'd take six months off, then go back to doing what I'd been doing."

Instead, one month later she and a friend started making crystal beaded name bracelets as a lark. They sold the bracelets at a holiday boutique "and I was hooked," Kelly says.

Soon her husband, who used to work in the office machine business, started helping on weekends. Then he started designing watchbands, adding charms and beads. These quickly became a hot trunk-show item.

When the items' popularity cooled, the Kellys looked for the next hot item. Now they design, manufacture and assemble brass shoe charms. Their products are in 50 craft malls across the country, and Kelly and her husband do between 30 and 35 retail and wholesale shows a year and say they make a "very" good living.

Shelley Cooper, owner of Sweet Romance Jewelry, which re-creates vintage jewelry, says the line that divides the dilettante from the professional is entrepreneurial spirit.

"The professional is willing to take the financial risk of putting the infrastructure in place--employees, studio, materials--to make the production happen."

Cooper employs 40 people in her Gardena-based business. Even though the jewelry is her passion, she says she goes through days when she doesn't think about her actual product at all.

For some artists, that's unthinkable.

After considering all the realities, many crafters decide, at the end of the daydream, to stick with their day jobs and moonlight. They know that turning their craft into a full-time business would kill their love of it.

"Many people work at their day jobs all week, do craft fairs on

weekends and work on their product at night," Phillips says. "They get the security and the benefits of their job, but keeping their craft as a sideline satisfies their artistic needs."

Phillips, however, can't get enough of the best part of her work: "Seeing customers buy what I've made and loving it."

Where to Get Help

If you're serious about the business of crafting, here are some resources:

* The Crafts Fair Guide, a listing of retail craft shows by community. Information: (415) 924-3259.

* The Crafts Report, industry news for the beginning or established crafts professional. Subscription: (800) 777-7098.

* Women Manufacturers Network, a professional organization of craftspeople who meet monthly. (Men can be members too.) Information: Darlene Rose, (949) 586-8297.

PHOTO: Former waitress Laurie Jo Phillips earns triple her old salary painting fabrics for items like lamps, above,

ID NUMBER: 19990715fetyxtgy

PHOTOGRAPHER: RICK MEYER / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: and curtains and towels, right.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: RICK MEYER / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Laurie Jo Phillips found a market for her placemats and other goods.

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