

Homewood's Hollywood Baby Swaddles Success

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Stacy Flippen has come a long way since starting a clothing design business in her Homewood home nine years ago.

Today her business, Hollywood Baby, employs 30 full- and part-time workers, including seamstresses who sew versions of 60 models of custom-designed boys and girls clothing under her label. She has a manufacturing facility in Etowah County and a retail warehouse in Homewood.



Frank Couch/Birmingham News

Stacy Flippen stands in her Hollywood Baby warehouse just off Oxmoor Road. She started the company nine years ago in her Homewood home.

Hollywood Baby's products are sold in 15 states, from Texas to Pennsylvania, through people who host parties in their homes. In December after noticing the recession was hitting home show sales, Flippen added online sales via her Web site, hollywoodbaby.net.

"Adding Web sales has helped shield our business from the economic downturn," said Flippen, whose sales have more than tripled over the past three years. She estimates Hollywood Baby sold 16,000 pieces of clothing last year, a big jump from a few hundred her first year in 2000.

Flippen came up with the idea for Hollywood Baby -- named after the Hollywood section of Homewood where she lives -- shortly after giving birth to her first child, Anna Claire, in 1999.

She had quit her job as a kindergarten teacher in Shelby County to become a stay-at-home mom and began designing chenille fabric diaper covers for her baby. Unable to sew herself, she turned to a friend, who made her designs into baby accessories she sold at the Cottontails craft show in Birmingham.

"I expected to sell just a few, but sold out quickly and thought, 'I might be onto something here,'" Flippen said.

KEPT GROWING:

She began designing children's clothing and storing them in their den, but soon outgrew the space. Her husband, Jerry, turned their basement into a storage house for her designs, and within two years, she hired three employees and moved the business to a small warehouse on U.S. 280, when sales more than doubled.

Flippen said her company had little overhead, which gave it a major advantage over many new businesses.

"It took very little money to start this business because everybody paid for their clothing upfront," she said. "I've never needed any type of financing. Having no company debt helps me sleep at night."

By 2004, Hollywood Baby's sales had tripled and she moved into a larger facility and additional warehouse space. Sales doubled again by 2006 and Flippen moved Hollywood Baby's headquarters into a warehouse just off Oxmoor Road in Homewood.

Flippen's products are sold in 70 cities across the Southeast and other states using hostesses who hold Hollywood Baby parties at their homes for friends, a concept similar to Tupperware parties. Companies such as Vinemont, Ala.-based Smartie Britches and Just Ducky Originals, based in Alexander, N.C., use hostesses to show off and sell children's clothing at home shows.

Flippen's most popular sales items for girls are three-tiered skirts (averaging \$40 apiece) and matching shirts, also \$40, she said. Boys outfits include Ben Rompers (\$51). Customers pick the designs they want and pay up front, and the clothes are then made to order. Mailing costs are \$9.95 per order.

"There is a lot of competition out there, so that keeps me on my toes to stay ahead," Flippen said. "I try to come up with new designs every year for my spring and fall catalogs to stay fresh."

Franz Lohrke, chairman of the entrepreneurial program at Samford University's Brock School of Business, said Flippen has a smart business model: outsourcing her sales and sewing.

"In this economy, you can easily outsource your services to people who need extra money," Lohrke said. "A lot of talented people losing jobs are using this as an opportunity to pursue entrepreneurship. It's important to find a niche and do research first."

PLANT NEARBY:

Flippen said her biggest challenge as an entrepreneur happened in August 2005, when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and displaced her main sewer to Texas.

To cut costs, she began looking for a facility to get her designs sewn in Alabama. By late 2006, Flippen learned of a manufacturing facility being closed in Altoona, a small Etowah County town not far from Oneonta.

She took over the building, and her Altoona facility now employs 11 seamstresses.

"I am glad I was able to give those people jobs," Flippen said. "It has benefited me having the production warehouse close by because now I can go there once a week and look over the final product more often."

Flippen said she comes from a family of entrepreneurs. Her father used to design and sell patio furniture, and her grandmother operated a women's retail store in Baltimore for decades. She said she hopes her story will inspire people to put their ideas and talents into action.

"I have lots of friends and neighbors who have lost jobs," she said. "Keep your vision and pursue your dream. Never lose focus and don't give up."

Join the conversation below or e-mail Williams at rwilliams@bhamnews.com.