

WORK & wealth

how i did it

DESIGNING ETHNIC HOME ACCENTS

After being downsized from her last corporate job, Cynthia Ham decided to become her own boss. Today she is president and CEO of Cultural Hangups, a company in Huntersville, North Carolina, that offers ethnic-inspired wall coverings for the home. Ham formed the company four years ago with her husband, John, who serves as the marketing director, and a college friend, Steven Jones. With three full-time and two part-time employees, last year the company earned a respectable six-figure revenue through the Angels Watching Over Me, Tea for Three and other designs. Ham expects income to climb when Cultural Hangups wall coverings land on Wal-Mart shelves next year. Here's how this enterprising sister did it:

CRAFTING A PLAN: "When I was pregnant, I couldn't find anything for the nursery that reflected the baby's heritage. While watching Oprah, I saw actress Holly Robinson Peete show how she decorated her children's room, and it gave me an idea. I asked an artist friend, Leo Rucker, to design a border with the alphabet, and a business was born. My parents were the initial investors; my sister, Karen, came up with a name that reflects our mission of designing cultural wall coverings; and a local businessman produced the first designs, which we sold on the Internet and at trade shows, flea markets and conventions."

SMOOTHING THE BUMPS: "We approached a well-established company, a major manufacturer of wall coverings, and were told there wasn't a market for our product. Finally Wal-Mart gave us a shot, placing a large order for its stores in Atlanta and Charlotte, North Carolina."

FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE: "To date, we've invested \$85,000, we're in the process of developing a teen and children's line and a fund-raiser program, and we've decorated Habitat for Humanity homes in Greensboro and Charlotte. Now the focus is moving to the next level. Through prayer, professionalism and perfecting what we've built, we hope Cultural Hangups becomes the source for wall coverings with flair." —SHERRI A. MCGEE ▷

