

WORK & Wealth

how i did it

SPECIALTY BOUTIQUE

Gwyn Worthy-Brown

OWNER: THE SECRET CLOSET

Gwyn Worthy-Brown was ready for a new challenge after a career as a model—for Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Dior and Givenchy, as well as for *ESSENCE*—and as a motivational speaker to high-school students. Following her own advice about careers, Worthy-Brown decided to become a business owner. In 1992 she opened The Secret Closet, an adult boutique in Englewood, New Jersey, investing \$20,000 from her savings and from family members. The elegant boutique, once a turn-of-the-century Victorian home, features a front room with lingerie and jewelry for men and women, and a popular back room with X-rated toys, massage oils, edible body paints and more.

Business is booming, with annual revenues in the six figures and new products flying off the shelves. A steady clientele has made The Secret Closet Englewood's toy store for adults. Here's how the St. Albans, New York, native keeps customers satisfied: **UNVEILING THE SECRET:** "Twelve years ago I opened my first lingerie boutique in Newark, New Jersey. Two years later I moved the shop to affluent Dean Street in Englewood and changed the name to The Secret Closet. My boutique was pretty much it for sexy lingerie in the area. Then Victoria's Secret arrived, and it was impossible to compete. So I went beyond traditional lingerie by offering various sex toys, cutout panties and signature items like a thong called Secrets Beneath. I also have in-store fashion shows, new-product demonstrations, bridal parties, fund-raisers and mail-order products."

OVERCOMING ODDS: "I was the first African-American boutique owner on the block. During that time I came across many pessimistic people who said, 'Oh, she'll never make it.' Back then, rent was a steep \$3,000 a month, and there were expenses like insurance, marketing and inventory to consider. As a single parent, the daily commute from my home in Newark to Englewood was also tough. But I've succeeded, thanks to faith, hard work, determination, and love and encouragement from my family and loyal customers."

PREPARING FOR SUCCESS: "My advice to anyone interested in owning a business is simple: Research successful companies and determine how to make yours better. Be prepared to work like you've never worked before, and surround yourself with people who believe in you."

—SHERRI A. MCGEE ▸

