



INSIDE BUSINESS

COVER STORY

Hats off to entrepreneurs

Machinist by day, designer by night

ASHLEY WILSON

Monday May 8, 2006

As far as entrepreneurs go, Jerome Hall is cut from a different cloth.

A shipyard machinist in coveralls by day, Hall transforms himself into a fashion designer, tailor and inventor at nights. And although he intends to keep up the dual identity for awhile, Hall's got big plans for his design business.

"I'm here to bring a product to market," said Hall on the evening of his graduation from the Small Business Development Center's NxLevel class for startup business owners.

For the ceremony, Hall is resplendent in a bright blue, Afro-centric robe with metallic gold insets at the collar. But the product in question is his "reversible sports crown," a pillbox-style hat emblazoned with different university logos on each side. Hall has patented his crown in the United States, Canada and a block of European provinces – all places with booming athletic competition, he said. He hopes to sell the item primarily in college bookstores, starting with Hampton University, where he's already won licensing agreements.

"It's a good time for this because it's a niche product," Hall said. "I use the example with the Cheesehead hats. People will spend money to associate themselves with their team. Now most sports fans have several

hats already, but this is different. The dictionary doesn't even define it as a hat, because it doesn't have a brim. When I set them out somewhere, they usually sell themselves."

From machinist to tailor

So how does a machinist end up with a needle and thread in his hands? In Hall's case, he was laid off.

That was back in 1993, when the Norfolk Naval Shipyard experienced a series of downsizing measures. "I wasn't supposed to get rifted, but when I saw my name on the list, I was so upset," Hall remembers. "I started sending out applications but wasn't getting much response. But after praying about it, I thought, it's time to start my own business."

Hall batted around ideas for a startup company, but the thought of a tailoring business came to him almost by accident.

"A friend of mine sews. I wanted an Afro-centric garment and couldn't find it, so I asked her to teach me how to sew it," he said. "When I put the first hem on the first garment, I just knew."

His sewing instructor, Janice Smith, said Hall had an uncanny knack for sewing and learned the skill in less than six months.

"I think he really had it in him anyway – it just took someone to bring it out," she said. "He caught on. You'd tell him something one time, and that was it."

Hall spent almost five years away from the shipyard, and in those years he became an established tailor and a co-owner of M'z P's Tailoring in Portsmouth.

"After 150, 200 garments, I started cutting things without patterns," he said. Hall abandoned forms and mannequins and began relying on a more instinctive knowledge of body contour. Soon, he was attending fashion shows and sewing custom-designed outfits for clients with unusual requests.

That's when the idea of the sports crown was born.

"Someone asked me for one of my headdresses with a football logo sewn on it, and I thought, hmmm. . ."

He did a brisk business selling crowns with professional sports logos until he realized that to market them legally, he would need a licensing agreement from the teams – something that seemed a little out of his price range at the time. His idea died for a while.

But once he returned to work at the shipyard, other custom crowns continued to bring in business. Hall sold them for some \$50 apiece to men coming off the ships where he worked. He carried a measuring tape

in his pocket at all times and stashed the cash from his sales in an old mayonnaise jar.

"I remember one day when I lost my wallet, and I had \$300 in it from these things," he said. "And that was before lunchtime."

It wasn't until one of his managers requested two crowns – one in a blue pattern and one in white – that Hall came up with the idea of the reversible headpiece.

"I said to myself, save him some money," Hall said. "And when he took it to the shipyard, I knew something was going on, because guys would stand on the pier, point at me and say, 'That's him.'"

That's when Hall took his crown to a patent attorney in Washington, D.C., and he nailed down the college market as the most viable way to find customers.

"College athletics run nine months out of the year versus four months for the professional season," Hall said. Licensing agreements from universities typically cost \$335 per agreement plus a 10 percent royalty payment per item sold, he said, as opposed to a \$300,000 fee of many professional teams.

With a clearcut idea in mind, a business plan and filing in the works for a company name, Reversible Sportz Crowns LLC, all Hall needed was a way to make his product.

An unlikely business partner

Hall's sewing studio is a small, narrow room in the back of his home in the Camelot subdivision of Chesapeake. The room is dark, except for the spotlight-style glare coming from two gooseneck lamps that light up Hall's cutting and sewing area. A television is situated under the window so Hall can watch while he works, and metal shelving flanks one wall, crammed with colored spools of thread and bits of cloth.

"I love to sew. I sew until my head tilts down, go to bed, wake up, press the button on the machine and start again," Hall said. "I've made everything from three-piece suits to lingerie. All my daughters had to go to their little debutante balls, and they asked me to make their prom gowns. I love the creative side of it."

A nearby rolling rack is jammed with clothing he has fashioned as part of his design company, Culturally Correct Tailored Fashions – mostly garments in brightly colored fabric and even leopard-print patterns.

"I haven't bought clothes in 12 years," said Hall, who believes that wearing his designs has been his best form of advertising. "People stop me on the street and say, Where did you get that? I give them a chuckle and say, you won't see these clothes unless you go through me."

This method has worked well for Hall, who can only handle so much business at one time – a single sports crown takes an average of 22 minutes, he said. He remembers setting up a Web site a few years back where people could place orders. There were so many hits that Hall wasn't prepared to keep up with the work. Fearing angry customers, he shut the site down.

If he really expected to make money off his sports crown, Hall realized, he would need to mass-produce.

Enter Quan "Catherine" Magill, a Chinese import consultant recommended by Lauren Small, Hall's small-business counselor at the SBDC.

"I was sitting right here when the e-mail popped up from Lauren," Hall said, pointing to a computer tucked behind his sewing machine. "I thought it was some homework from the NxLevel class. But this wasn't part of the curriculum."

Instead, Small explained that she thought Hall could save manufacturing funds by outsourcing his products through Magill.

Hall and Magill make unlikely business partners. On the day of their interview with INSIDE BUSINESS, Hall is dressed head-to-toe in red corduroy – an unusual choice for an Afro-centric garment, he admits, but a functional one for a cool day. Magill, on the other hand, is unobtrusive in a cardigan sweater, slacks and flat shoes.

Magill hails from the town of Qingdao, China, where she worked in the international trading business, shipping duvet covers, pillows and other bedroom products to Japan. She still laughs about how she got to the United States eight years ago.

"I wanted to be an accounting student. My hometown is on the eastern coast of China, and Norfolk is on the eastern coast of the United States, on same latitude, so that's why I chose ODU. I met my husband there, became a CPA, but I always wanted to be part of the business between America and China, like a bridge," Magill said.

Her company, Great Bridge International LLC, founded in September, has since helped the Hampton Roads Economic Development Alliance bring business from China to the United States, and she hopes to expand into international business brokerage, traveling with businesspersons to meet potential suppliers in China. Her own first import shipment consisted of 600 embroidered canvas bags, which arrived by air. She will supply the bags, wind chimes and arts-and-crafts items to oceanfront shops.

Magill has yet to price the manufacturing process for Hall, but the pair are already well on their way to their first Hampton University order.

"My phone rings at night, and it's Catherine with questions," Hall said. "She wants to know all the dimensions, the exact color of the fabric, the logo. She and her husband created a spreadsheet with instructions for

making this. They made it so if you were a second-grader you could place the logo. I said, 'this is cool.'"

Magill believes that she can help Hall cut his manufacturing prices in half.

"In China, the average salary is \$100 a month, so you can really reduce costs," she said.

With the Hampton University prototype already created, Hall and Magill are moving ahead. Hall has already contacted Virginia Union University, Howard University and Morgan State University to begin the application process, and he expects to tackle Duke University next, along with other schools that already manufacture fabric printed with their mascots – something that will save the cost of creating an embroidered logo for each. He'll market Magill's embroidered bags to the university along with his sports crowns.

He hopes to launch product lines for as many as six colleges within the first year, then eventually ramp up to 10 per year. That's when he'll seek bank loans.

"When I go to the big colleges, I'd rather use their money, but first I want to show that once this product goes to market it can take care of itself," he said. "Our plan is to eventually market to every college in the country with a competitive sports program, which I would say is about 600 – but I don't want to overwork Catherine." He laughs.

"I kid because I'm a happy person. Now, if they took my job, it wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen to me. I told the woman who taught me to sew, what you've taught me is how to fish. I'll be able to take care of myself forever with this."

A service of Richmond.com

All material copyright © 1999 - 2003 Richmond.com and Partners.