

On the Road Again

Ever dream of hitting the pavement and taking your embroidery machine across the country to stitch everything from biker vests to cowboy hats? You'll meet four stand-out decorators who are doing just that - and bringing in the green.

By Daniel Walsh, Tracie Close, Shane Dale
and Renee Gendreau-Waitlevertch



What kind of quirky embroiderers load up their machines and supplies to take their businesses on the road? Determined, free-spirited ones – who know how to smartly turn a profit at festivals and other niche events (and come up with creative solutions when the going gets tough). Stitches joined four mobile embroiderers at a biker convention in Tulsa, OK, a cattle drive in Reno, NV, a dog show in western Pennsylvania and a seafood festival at the Jersey shore. Come along for the ride – and see what you can learn from them!

BAD TO THE BONE

Heath Porter has this dream: His apparel lines, The Chop Shop and Paradise Originals, make it big. He walks on the beach in Miami, and people look at him and say, “Hey, isn’t he the guy who designed these awesome clothes?” Porter doesn’t need to be rich, so he gives good-paying jobs to friends and employees who helped get him here.

That’s the dream, at least. It’s why he’s on the road long before dawn on Friday, June 26, driving five hours from his shop in Kansas City, MO to the Biker Boyz Weekend convention in Tulsa, OK, to spread the word and his product, custom-embroidered biker apparel that’s proving to be in demand.

It’s 8:41 a.m. as Porter’s caravan pulls into the Tulsa Exchange Center: one car, one truck with a trailer, and a pony-tailed guy on a Harley Davidson motorcycle. The nine-person team left Kansas City around 4 a.m., and everyone’s tired. Adrenaline will kick in later, but right now, it’s time to stretch and figure out where they need to be. Tina Stewart, a short, slim, pale-skinned woman with fire-engine red hair known alternately as Red or Red-top, heads in to check where their spot at the convention will be. They’re early, so there’s no need to set up yet. Stewart wonders aloud about checking in at their hotel early so everyone can wash up, and she’s informed the hotel is pretty packed with guests. “Wow, there’s a biker convention and a Jehovah’s Witness convention,” she says.

The team hits the road, headed to a car wash so they can take off the 200-plus miles of grime collected on the black trailer sporting The Chop Shop logo. This trailer will be their base of operations during the convention, as they set up outside it to sell their wares, so it needs to be clean.

As they start washing the truck, Porter takes stock of his colorful crew. As it turns out, they’re not your average bunch, and that starts with Porter. The first thing you



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notice is his size: 6 feet 8 inches tall, with size 18 sneakers. Decked out in a grayish outfit of his own design, he is African-American with close-cropped hair and a gold tooth that flashes when he smiles his big smile and talks even bigger. He explains his target customer: a motorcyclist who wants the clothes to match his bike. Whether they come from the Harley culture, with its massive choppers and black leathers, or the street bike culture and its “crotch rockets,” sporting more colorful clothes similar to the hip-hop street culture, he tries to hit them both. His ability to hit both stems from a car club he started in 1990 that he says was the first interracial car club in the Midwest.

“This is the lifestyle,” Porter says. “It’s to get down and boogie. With this younger sport-bike crowd, it’s not about your color. It’s about riding the best bike and looking cool while doing it, and we’re one of the best there is at making you look cool.”

ONE HECK OF A CREW

Porter’s put a lot into his dream over the last 20 years, and he has the battle scars to prove it. Dark spots run up and down his legs, caused, he says, by working such long days on his feet that it’s given him something like varicose veins at age 39. He’s

partially blind in one eye, which doctors attribute to brain swelling caused by stress. But, he doesn’t seem weighed down by these hardships. Instead, he seems to thrive on them.

Porter’s crew isn’t your ZZ Top crowd on Harleys, which makes sense considering he sells to more than just that crowd. Rather, The Chop Shop team members have a mix of white and black skin and range in age from 21 to 61. Some work for Porter full-time and others just help a little on the side. They include:

- “Little Mikey” Tanner, Porter’s 21-year-old protégé and embroiderer,

About The Chop Shop

Owners: Heath Porter and Stan Rush

Location: Kansas City, MO

Company founded: 2000

Estimated 2010 sales: \$265,000

2009 sales: \$250,000

Customer demographics: Individuals who want custom embellishments

Specific services offered: Embroidery, screen printing, vinyl design, graphic design

Secret to success: “Hard work, never give up,” Porter says. “We work 18 hours a day.”

Daily Log

8:41 a.m.: The Chop Shop's nine-person team, led by Heath Porter, arrives at the Tulsa Exchange Center after driving more than four hours and 240 miles from Kansas City, MO.

9:38 a.m.: The crew finishes cleaning the Chop Shop trailer at a local car wash before heading back to their hotel to shower, change into their show clothes and relax.

12:31 p.m.: Porter and his crew head back to the Exchange Center to set up shop before Biker Boyz Weekend.

4 p.m.: The first customers start trickling in. The Chop Shop's custom-embroidered mesh biker vests are really popular.

8:37 p.m.: The team leaves the convention center after a long day, goes back to their hotel and changes clothes to head out to a late-night party, at which they'll promote their original designs by wearing them.

a 5-foot-nothing fireplug with a quick smile who's a former gang banger with the Crips.

- Steve "Big Jax" Jackson, the team's marketing and sales guru, a sports radio producer and host in Kansas City nicknamed for his size (about 6 feet 1 inch tall, 250-plus pounds) and his days as an offensive lineman.

- Tina Stewart, a.k.a. Red, The Chop Shop's office manager and organizational whip-cracker who, despite barely topping five feet tall, shows that 40-year-old mothers of five (with a grandchild!) can rock a short skirt and tank top.

- Ella Junior, a 61-year-old widow who specializes in sewing original patches onto clothes and decided about two years ago to start riding a motorcycle.

- Wade Harrison, the ponytailed, bespectacled owner of the aforementioned Harley and an information technology specialist.

- Bryan Robinson, a soft-spoken, laid-back youth football coach who runs a photo studio on the side.

- Janai Sherrell and Rachel Vanhamme, each here to basically look hot in tight clothes and draw attention to themselves and The Chop Shop.

GETTING GEARED UP

At 9:38 a.m., Tanner stops traffic on the street so they can back the trailer out. "Watch the pole!" someone yells. Then it's back to the Exchange Center, where they arrive at 9:51 a.m. to secure their location inside. Porter goes for a spot in the back, where they have four booths reserved, and they bring the trailer in. "We're crooked!" Stewart calls. "Crooked?" "We're crooked!" Then eventually, they're not. Anyone walking into the Exchange Center should get a straight-on view of The Chop Shop trailer.

"I want to make sure we get as much exposure as we can," Jackson says as he examines the angles.

"Here's one booth," Stewart says, measuring their space. "That's two booths."

"I don't want it to be too close to the door," Jackson says.

They talk with an organizer to ensure they have a prime location. Porter eventually pulls out some apparel to show what The Chop Shop is all about, and it's more than just biker gear. He shows a custom-

ized Chiefs jersey sporting the number and autograph of the late Hall of Fame linebacker, Derrick Thomas, a Chiefs icon in the 1990s who died in 2000 after a car wreck at age 33. "When I tell you it's custom, it's custom," Porter says. "I went to a Chiefs game, and I had at least 50 guys trying to pull this off me." He eventually started an impromptu auction, and bidding went up to over \$200 before he handed out some business cards and told everyone to just come to The Chop Shop to buy it for less.

RIDIN' ROOMLESS

A few minutes later, the team gets ready to leave for the Tulsa Select hotel when a problem arises. "There's no rooms available," Stewart says. Not till 4 p.m., at least, and that's when the convention starts. Not good, considering everyone needs to change clothes and the women have to slip into "must-exude-hotness" mode. Porter promptly starts directing traffic. "OK, get me an alternative," he calls out. "That's what we have these phones for. Now start working." Everyone does. Sherrell calls another hotel that she found a listing for on her cell phone. Stewart gets back on the phone with the Tulsa Select and says she wants the three rooms they reserved, or at least one of them, and she wants them now. "I told him I need a room in



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10 minutes, or someone else will get our business,” she says.

Sure enough, the Tulsa Select magically finds a room that’s ready. By 11:45 a.m., everyone checks into the one room immediately available, all nine packed inside to relax for a few minutes and shoot the breeze. Robinson wants to iron his T-shirt. “I just can’t leave wrinkled,” he says, and the guys start laughing about how their parents wouldn’t let them leave the house as kids if their clothes were wrinkled. “My average customer thinks the exact same way,” Porter says. “It’s all about persona. We give off the effect that we’re what you want. It’s all about flair, style. That’s what this lifestyle is about.”

When a second room becomes available, the women head over to clean up and change, and soon enough, it’s just Robinson, Jackson and Tanner left. Tanner explains how he came to work with Porter as a young teenager, leaving the trailer park and a gang-banging fatherless life behind for a real trade. Robinson has seen too many kids like Tanner go wrong over the years, leading an inner-city youth football program. “He’s a work in progress. He’s a good kid. Just keep a foot in his butt,” Robinson says before turning to Tanner. “I’ve been to too many youth funerals in my time. I may yell at you, but I won’t let anyone else do it. You’re learning a trade. Statistically speaking, you should be dead right now because of how you were raised, what you went through.”

The topic gets happier soon enough as they start talking music, when Run DMC gets mentioned as an alternative to modern, commercialized hip-hop, with all its fake gangsters and posers. “Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Jackson says.

“They just don’t make music the way they used to,” Robinson says. “I hear these young guys – they say they want to be rappers. I say, ‘Who are your influences?’ They say ‘Tupac, Biggie. I say, ‘What do you know about Tupac?’ They say, ‘He was a gangster.’ A gangster? He was a dancer!”

“He was an actor, a poet,” Jackson says.



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“These young kids, they don’t know anything about rap,” Robinson says.

What’s revealed says a lot about these guys and how they approach their market. They’re not caught up in the street-culture hype, but rather its substance, and it allows them to understand what appeals stylistically and is actually useful.

REVVING THEIR ENGINES

At 12:31 p.m., everyone heads back to the convention center. It’s prep time. As this goes down, it becomes clear that the most important part of life on the road isn’t so much the moments of chaos where Porter and his crew are trying to custom embroider and sew designs onto clothing for waiting customers. No, what matters is how they prepare for it. Over the next three hours, all sorts of problems arise, and they take care of each one in turn. Tanner doesn’t have a specialized brush to clean one embroidery machine, so, after they can’t find a proper replacement, he comes up with a makeshift one and scrubs down the machine till it’s clean. The shelving unit inside is broken, and that gets scrapped. A tent canopy turns out to have a broken brace. A ceiling panel that covers a power line is falling down inside the trailer.

“You’ve got to be prepared,” Tanner says as he and Harrison go to work inside the trailer, where the embroidery equipment is set up. “And duct tape’s your best friend.”

Throughout the day, the electricity will go out in the trailer at least three times, overstressed by two embroidery machines going at full speed. The trailer has a stand-alone generator, but Porter doesn’t want to use it, so each time, Harrison kicks the power from the Exchange Center back into gear.

Once customers start trickling in after 4 p.m., the big draw is the customized Chop Shop vests. They’re not just any old leather biker vests. Porter’s design basically crosses the biker culture with street fashion. He’s perforated the vests, and they look like mesh used for football jerseys and basketball shorts. Nobody’s ever seen anything like it before. Porter explains they can embroider the bikers’ “street names” on them, as well as the logos of motorcycle groups such as the Ruff Ryders. If you have an image, Porter and Tanner can stitch it. DeMarco Corbin, a local biker, promptly decides he wants one, and so in turn do others. The fact that various colors are available is apparently important, and most sell in the \$100 range. At first blush, it sounds like a gang thing, but Tulsa police officer and biker Cleon Burrell says it’s not. “If you’re with a group, you got to have your colors,” Corbin says. “If you don’t have your colors, you’re an outsider.”

Porter wants to produce this apparel on a wide scale, and now he finally has

an investor and manufacturer to back the endeavor. Porter says his investor, Idrish Tadkesaria, has established ties to tanneries and factories in Pakistan, and they're already beginning wider production. In the late 1990s, Porter tried something like this with his Paradise Originals line, but it failed because he didn't have the manufacturing ties to meet the high demand. He doesn't plan to fail again, but nobody's rich yet. "Of course, our pockets are still empty," he says. "The truth is we're not making a lot of money. This is a dream."

WORK HARD, PARTY HARD

The day turns out to be not as crazy as the crew expected. Most people are likely waiting for Saturday, when famed stunt biker Jason Britton will be the star attraction, and noted bike builder Jerry Covington is already here. Customers come steadily throughout the day, but it's never pure chaos, not yet. The team handles things easily, but they know it's just a warm-up day. Saturday will be stitch and move, move and sell. "Heath will be losing his mind by tomorrow," laughs Corey Carroll, one of the event's organizers.

But already, it's clear how easily the team works together. And, The Chop Shop may have something here in these vests. Customers are consistently wowed by them. They sell.

The convention closes at 8 p.m., but Porter doesn't shut things down until ordered to. If they hadn't been kicked out, they probably would've stayed till midnight. By 8:37 p.m., the Exchange Center is empty of people. Tanner is one of the last two out the door. Even the security guard doesn't stick around, locking up and driving off as soon as they're out.

It's been a long day, but Stewart and Harrison try to sell the merits of the post-convention party to the team. Some crew members are hitting the hay, but the rest will head to the late-night party. They'd better enjoy it, because the next day's going to be chaos. — *Daniel Walsh*

The Embroidery Cowboy

The weather is usually nice this time of year in northern Nevada, but on this 75-degree Sunday in June, it's especially beautiful. "The wildflowers are just starting to bloom," says Karen Gallio as she and her significant other, Don Cose, speed along in their truck to their destination in the middle of nowhere. "You can see green on the hills. Usually there isn't green on the side of these mountains. It's going to be lovely for the guests."

The guests in this case are the 55 Wild West fanatics who spent \$1,600 for the annual four-day Reno Rodeo Cattle Drive in a desert-landscaped campsite 50 miles northwest of Reno and several miles from



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any main road. And Cose, who's co-owner of The Stitchin Post and one of 50 directors of the Reno Rodeo Association, was invited again this year to perform on-the-spot embroidery for the guests and 300-plus "teamster" volunteers who set up and run the Cattle Drive.

Cose, 64, has 30 years of embroidery and digitizing experience. "My main motto is, 'Quality begins before the first stitch,' he says. "If you're using quality thread, if you're using quality stabilizers, you're going to put in a quality product. That's kind of what I've based my entire operation on."

That quality is evident in the self-embroidered work that Cose is wearing. The patch on the right chest of his blue denim shirt reads, "Rodeo: American Tradition," while the patch on the left chest includes an American flag. Above the flag are the words "God and Country," while "Air Force" is stitched below – all in yellow letters. And, like every other man (and most women) at the campsite, Cose is sporting a cowboy hat.

GETTIN' TO THREADIN'

When Cose and Gallio arrive at the campsite, they make themselves at home in their trailer, which will serve as their office for the day. Cose revs up his two embroidery machines: a Brother PR620 single-head six-needle machine, and a Melco Amaya

single-head 16-needle machine. He quickly goes to work on his first order of the day: a three-color Reno Rodeo logo on a pink button-down shirt.

The pink shirt is part of Reno Rodeo's Tough Enough to Wear Pink campaign, which is worn by rodeo participants and volunteers in support of breast cancer research. The Reno Rodeo Association participates in this and other charitable events around the year, such as bringing horses to grade-school children and showing the kids how to properly pet those horses and ride in a saddle. "We're doing something just about every month to show the folks that

the rodeo isn't just a 10-day-a-year project for us," he says. "This is for 365 days." So, this pink shirt order is just one of 25 that Cose will receive from the time he makes it to the campsite at 9:40 a.m. to the time the guests arrive three hours later.

These orders were all placed by the volunteers, but that's not what will keep Cose busy for the most of the week – the Cattle Drive purchased Western vests for all of the guests, and each one needs to be embroidered. "Unfortunately, I didn't get them until Wednesday, so I'm going to try to get 100 done between now and Thursday," he says.

JUST A COWBOY AT HEART

The Cattle Drive guests pitch tents at the campsite, learn how to ride horses, negotiate Old West-type wagons driven by horses and mules, receive no 21st-century luxuries (except a shower), and ultimately drive in 300 head of cattle into the Reno Rodeo grounds for the beginning of the 10-day rodeo, which is in its 20th year. "They try to make it as close to authentic as they can," Cose says, "which means no cell phones. There was a gentleman riding a horse with his cell phone one year, and one of our riders rides up and grabs his cell phone and pitches it in the water tank and says, 'They didn't have cell phones back then.'"

Cose, who was in the Air Force and Air National Guard for 35 years, has been a part of every single rodeo since he moved to Nevada from South Dakota in 2001, where he learned to love the cowboy way of life. His move followed the death of his wife from small-cell lung cancer in 1999. Following a visit to his brother who lived in Sparks, NV, the following year, Cose met Gallio, 67, whose husband passed away from pancreatic cancer just a few months after Cose lost his wife.

After Cose traveled back to South Dakota, he invited Gallio to go motorcycle riding with him in a rally in Black Hills. After 1,700 miles of riding over a littler more than two days, they decided they needed to be together.

"He's just a very good-hearted person. Always has been," says Gallio, who notes that Cose served in Vietnam, but the gov-



Daily Log

9 a.m.: Don Cose and Karen Gallio leave Reno, NV, and head for the Reno Rodeo Cattle Drive campsite about 50 miles northwest of the city.

9:40 a.m.: Cose and Gallio arrive at the campsite and head to their trailer. Cattle Drive volunteers are already lining up to have jackets, vests and shirts embroidered by Cose.

10 a.m.: Cose begins to work on his first order of the day: a pink button-down shirt for the Reno Rodeo's Tough Enough to Wear Pink campaign to raise money for breast cancer research.

10:20 a.m.: Cose completes his embroidery on the pink shirt. Volunteers begin to bring in food to prepare lunch for the guests.

12:30 p.m.: Cose is completing the embroidery on his sixth garment of the day. The guests arrive on a fancy bus with their supplies and tents. They unwittingly participated in a staged Old West-style gun holdup just a couple hours earlier, in which they were forced off of their bus and ordered to give all of their valuables (which were returned) to the "hijackers." Upon arriving, they begin to set up camp anywhere from 100 to 1,000 feet away from the center of the campsite.

1 p.m.: Lunch is served, but Cose stays busy in his trailer placing an embroidered logo on a jacket.

2 p.m.: Gallio finally gets Cose to step away from his embroidery machine long enough to eat lunch. Cose worries about possible stitch breaks while he eats. "I can't leave it because by the time I do, it goes, 'Gotcha!'" he says.

2:30 p.m.: The guests head out on a wagon shake-down ride. Cose continues to plug away, completing an order every 20 minutes or so.

7 p.m.: After doing everything he can on his Brother (his Melco machine's software isn't functioning properly), the sun begins to set, live musical entertainment arrives at the campsite, and Cose and Gallio pack up for the day and head back to civilization.

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ernment never formally recognized him as a veteran since he served in a high-security communications capacity. “People who go in to volunteer into the military and take those risks are very special people. He’s never lost that. It’s just too bad he’s not independently wealthy, because he totally enjoys doing embroidery and he’d rather be able to do this and give it to people to bring joy to them instead of charging them for doing a service.”

IT’S ALL ABOUT THE CRAFT

By 10 a.m., Cose is plugging away on that pink shirt order in his trailer that stands amid the wagons, cattle and mobile saloon at the campsite. While Gallio stands in front of the trailer taking orders – and trying to keep Cose distraction-free – Cose finds the correct Reno Rodeo logo on his Dell laptop, locates the correct Floriani thread color in his box, and attaches it to his Brother machine.

Unfortunately, that’s all that Cose will have at his disposal today, as there’s an issue with his Melco machine’s software. “The software comes up like it’s supposed to, the machine turns on and it gets to a point where it’s loaded on the screen, but it’s supposed to go back to the last item we did, and while it’s trying to do that, it’s not responding,” he says.

In the meantime, Cose keeps plugging away on his Brother machine to create the logo on the pink shirt. “It’s a pink logo with black outline, black lettering and a silver bucking horse,” he says. He saves the

design to his memory stick, then plugs the stick into the Brother, where he can make the logo as large or small as he wants. “And now it’ll tell me what colors to put at which stitch,” he says.

Cose likes to use a measuring device called Embroiderer’s Buddy, a guide that allows him to place the logo in just the right spot on each garment. “I’m trying to find the middle of the pocket,” he says as he lays the shirt flat on a table next to the machine. He adjusts his Embroiderer’s Buddy to work with this men’s large shirt, which will fall down the center of the placket. “Then, I already have a piece of medium-weight 2-to-2.5-oz. cutaway stabilizer ready to go,” he says.

In this case, Cose says the cutaway is a better choice than a tearaway stabilizer, “because when you’re tearing it away from the design, you’re going right up to the stitches and you’re going against those stitches, and I don’t want to do that.”

Twenty minutes later, Cose’s first embroidery effort of the day is finally complete, which gives him time to reflect on his ability to be a mobile embroiderer – including working onsite at horse and dog shows – which would have been impossible as recently as a decade ago. “Ten or 20 years ago, what you would’ve had for equipment would’ve been very large and very heavy,” he says. “I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing now without today’s modern technology.”

One man who’s especially thankful for Cose’s mobile abilities is David Semas, the sponsor of this year’s Cattle Drive. “Don is a friend of ours and he’s done a great job,” he says. “He’s very much a part of this way of life and we just think the world of them. He’s a craftsman. Cowboys first and foremost are Americans, but they’re also craftsmen, and he exemplifies that.”

READY TO ROUGH IT

For the paying customers, the appeal of the Cattle Drive is the old-fashioned cowboy way of life. “And while we’ve got a beautiful campsite – a saloon and all these things –

tomorrow morning when these folks saddle up and get on their horses, it’s going to be them pushing 300 head of steer, and it’s a real rodeo,” Semas says. “So, it’s really just kind of a romantic way of seeing how the West was won.”

People from all over the world come to experience the Cattle Drive to fully appreciate what it meant to truly rough it, Semas says, including folks from China, Pakistan, India, Japan – and this year, Hawaii. “Because they’ve romanticized about the cowboy way of life, they find it fascinating to come out here,” he says. “But a lot of them have never even been on a horse.”

Everyone has their own reasons for being here. “My father has spoken highly of this,” says Jeanne Conley, 43, from Chino Hills, CA, after pitching her tent a couple hundred feet from Cose’s trailer. “It’s kind of nice to do something outside of the box and be with people who are just as wacky as we are, and have fun.”

Conley’s nephew, Randy Carroll, 21, from Ontario, CA, was attracted by the freedom that the getaway provides. “I’m looking forward to heading out in the open range,” he says.

The volunteers seem to desire the middle-of-nowhere atmosphere as much as the guests. Melanie Schwartzler, 26, from Greenwood, CA, is helping her dad keep people safe on the wagons by riding horses out in front of them. She’s also having Cose embroider an old-school Reno Rodeo logo on her jacket. “I love coming out here,” she says. “It’s just laid-back. Time doesn’t matter out here, so you can wake up, relax and enjoy yourself. It’s a vacation.”

After lunch, the guests head out on horses and wagons in the afternoon, and begin to acclimate themselves to the 19th-century atmosphere for the first time. But, Cose keeps plugging away in his trailer, unable to fully appreciate and take in the beautiful weather and scenery around him. By early afternoon, he has four shirts and two vests complete.

Gallio made Cose take a 15-minute break

About The Stitchin Post

Owners: Don Cose and Karen Gallio

Location: Reno, NV

Company founded: 2005

Estimated 2010 sales: \$25,000

2009 sales: \$15,000

Customer demographics: Event visitors, association members

Specific services offered: Custom embroidery and digitizing

for lunch, but otherwise, there will be very little rest for him today – or the remainder of the week. “We’ll haul out of here tonight and come back Tuesday night with whatever’s already done, and we have to set up in town at the rodeo by noon on Thursday, ready to go,” he says.

And, while time is short, this cowboy and craftsman will refuse to sacrifice quality to make it up. “If I don’t like it,” Cose says while looking up from his machine to drive his point home, “it’s not going out.” – *Shane Dale*

IT'S A WORLD

It's late morning on a steamy early-summer day when two women passing the Elite Embroidery Designs tent stop to point and chuckle. “Group Therapy” is the motto on the T-shirt sporting a daiquiri, beer and glass of wine – the shirt that’s stopped the ladies on their stroll around the grounds of the Memorial Classic Dog Show at the Lawrence County Fairgrounds, about an hour north of Pittsburgh.

While reflective of owner Chris Herbold’s feisty personality, the crystal-studded best-selling tee isn’t what the North Port, FL, resident considers her specialty. Instead, she jokes, her talents have gone to the dogs.

Inside the white Ford E450 Super Duty box truck parked nearby are her 12 canine traveling companions this trip, seven Weimaraners, three Yorkies, a Doberman and a hairless Chinese Crested. Also part of the entourage is her husband and business partner, Scott, who’s manning the tent while she tends to embroidering, along with grooming dogs that use more hair products than most women.

“You can’t come in here with a little bottle of Suave and expect to be competitive in the ring,” jokes the 47-year-old Herbold who, through her Rumor Yorkies business, has been breeding and showing dogs for about two decades.

Herbold started with Yorkshire terriers because “I grew up in a house where only big dogs were allowed, although we once

had a token poodle.” Some Weims were added five years later when her husband and two now-grown sons informed her it was “time for some real dogs.”

THE PICK OF THE LITTER

Still, breeding and showing is only part of the couples’ work. Tucked into a crowded row of vendors offering everything from dog biscuits to specialty shampoos, Elite Embroidery’s bright-blue tent showcases the company’s custom pieces, as well as heat-press and crystal designs.

Fighting for attention alongside vendors offering dog-food samples, yapping pups with their hair in wraps and the sweet smells of “really delicious” hot apple dumplings, Herbold knows that she has to offer products that will make her the “pick of the litter.” Her designs have to stop handlers and owners in their tracks on the way to the show’s three competition rings, located just across the dirt road from her display.

Amid the carnival-like atmosphere, customer Nancy Poole of Washington D.C. was thrilled to find Herbold’s stand. “I’ve been coveting your chairs. I saw one of these at a show awhile ago and knew I wanted one,” says Poole, ordering one with the likeness of her basset hound, Champion Zen’ara Dr. Robert, a.k.a. Bob, on the seat back.

The collapsible sports chairs with fold-

About Elite Embroidery Designs

Owners: Chris and Scott Herbold

Location: Based in North Port, FL, but on the road more than at home

Company founded: 2004

Customer demographics: Dog show-goers: breeders, handlers, dog lovers of all sorts

Specific services offered: Custom on-site embroidery; dog-club trophy items; personalized items; breed-specific items and shirts designed with crystals. Many specialty items, including slip leads and seasonal items.



out tables are among Herbold’s best-sellers. “Just like a regular store, we change our merchandise. On rainy days, it’s the coats and umbrellas that sell. In the winter, it’s the fleece,” she explains, noting that many items can be done onsite, although, “Sometimes we have to ship because there’s just not enough time in one weekend.

“A lot of times people will buy something from another vendor and ask me to personalize it. I tell them if I can hoop it, I can sew it,” says Herbold, who has a degree in fashion, textile and design but never used it until she started her own business.

“It helps to know threads, but being out here in dog world, you have to know what every breed looks like,” says Herbold, who can stitch more than 170 canine varieties. “The biggest challenge is when people say, ‘That doesn’t look like my dog.’ Well, it’s not your dog; it’s a representation of your dog’s breed,” she says, adding that for an additional fee, she can digitize pho-

Daily Log

6 a.m.: Scott Herbold is up with the dogs, usually a dozen or so, who accompany their owners on travels. They're fed, "Xed" (exercised) and given some play time.

8 a.m.: Scott and his wife, Chris, open their booth. If they're showing dogs at a particular event, she'll leave for the ring while Scott mans the shop. ("He's never touched the machine," she says.)

On non-show days: Chris sews, does mail orders and tends to the dogs, which can mean anything from putting wraps in the Yorkies' hair to making arrangements for breeding, along with several sessions of dog walking, feeding and exercising.

After dinner: ("There's a lot of barbecuing around here"), Scott sets off for yet another job, working on "rigs." "We all travel and that means we all have things we need done to our rigs. It's convenient to have someone right here who knows how to do it," Chris says, noting that her former race-car-driver husband usually has several jobs every evening, ranging from oil changes to air-conditioner repairs. "This gives him some self-satisfaction. It lets him know he's not just my chauffeur," she says.

2 a.m.: Chris finally calls it a day after a night spent stitching, as well as catching up on orders and e-mails and sneaking an occasional episode of *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance* via satellite TV.

tos to create something that looks more like "my dog."

Of course, being "dog-friendly" does have a few drawbacks. "Most businesses worry most about retail theft, but our biggest concern is visitors peeing on the product. Look, that's why I put everything so high up," whispers Herbold, pointing on the sly, to a "customer" taking care of business while its owner shopped. "Hopefully, he won't pillage the village," she adds.

Such worries are a far cry from Herbold's

former career running the pricing and contracts division of Baxter Healthcare in suburban Chicago. Still, she considers being laid off on her birthday six years ago "the best present ever."

"It was a very good company, but the work depleted who I was as a person. Because you pull in six figures, you're one of the Joneses," Herbold says. "Right now, I'd rather be a Smith."

"I LOVE THE THREAD BUSINESS"

Herbold's downsizing led the couple to decide to leave both their native Illinois



and Scott's job with Chrysler to relocate to Florida. But, first, they had a house to sell.

When the first person who came and looked at the house mentioned she had her own embroidery company, Herbold was intrigued. "She didn't buy the house, but God works in mysterious ways," she says. "I thought I was going to stay in the medical field, but this seemed pretty cool. She gave me all I needed to know about going to school to learn the business."

Once in Florida, Scott opened a waste-management company while his wife began trying her hand at the embroidery business. Three weeks later, in August 2004,

Hurricane Charley hit. While the storm devastated the region, it was good for the dumpster business. Another plus: All of the companies and nonprofit groups helping with the recovery efforts needed shirts and hats embroidered with their logos.

About two years ago, "when the economy bottomed out," the couple sold the waste business and hit the road. "It's not a lifestyle that's for everyone. You have to be able to travel a lot, and travel quickly, and be able to afford \$500 to rent a spot at a show and hope you make \$1,000 to cover your expenses," Herbold admits, adding that her sales have been down this year due

to the economy. “It’s extremely competitive out here. And, I don’t just mean in the show ring.”

In 2009, the couple spent only five weeks in their Florida home. Instead, they usually stay onsite at dog shows, living out of their RV which serves as office, workroom and residence. Between shows, they find campgrounds with “luxuries” such as showers and laundry facilities.

It’s in RV’s work area, home to a lounging Weimaraner retired from the show scene, where Herbold spends most of her time, stitching at a Tajima Neo 2 machine. Although she has additional machines back in Florida, only the Tajima goes on the road and stays in the RV to save room in the 10-foot-by-10-foot “store.” “I prefer the mobility of what I do,” explains Herbold, who sometimes enlists a stay-at-home mom and grandma back in Florida help when business gets hectic.

BARK YOU, BABY

Also staying at home are any new litters of puppies and their moms that are “babysat” by Herbold’s mother. All of the other dogs hit the road, whether they’re being shown at a particular event or not. On a rotating basis, each dog is given a night in the RV rather than in their crates in the box truck. “Just because we travel all the time, we don’t want the dogs feeling like they’re not at home,” Herbold says. “But, you’ll note the dogs have two air conditioners and there’s only one in here.”

The well-chilled box truck, which sports “Bark You” and “Go Bark Yourself” signs, also serves as a reminder of Herbold’s past. “I traded my Lincoln Navigator with only 9,200 miles on it for that,” she mused. “Sometimes I think, ‘What has my world become?’ I left Jimmy Choo at home, traded him for Nikes with dog poop on them.”

Regardless, Herbold has no plans to quit. “We’re still young and we enjoy what we do,” she says, adding that the couple does plan to cut down on canine events during the next year and add a few horse shows to the mix.

“My mom keeps asking when I’m going back to the corporate world, and I keep telling her I’m not going back. I may work 18-hour days, but I’m my own person. I’m not a number. You might just see me out here at age 85 still doing embroidery at dog shows.” – *Renee Gendreau-Waitlevertch*

STITCHING AT THE JERSEY SHORE

It’s a sunny day in Belmar, NJ. You can hear nearby waves rolling in as the sun continues to burn off the last of the morning haze. The boardwalk along the shoreline is filling up with coaches, runners and families ready for a Sunday at the Jersey shore. The air is still cool enough to show it’s morning, but a Sunday in June means

Seafood Festival.

Also busy is Karin Killian, owner and operator of 2Friends Ribbon Gifts. Although she takes the time to pleasantly greet passersby, she never stops moving as she hangs up her signs and shelves products throughout the small space under her tent. “If there was ever a day when I sold all my stock in one show, that would be the end,” she says jokingly, but admits she looks forward to every show, and that her word-of-mouth business is growing.

“This show,” she says, referring to the third and final day of the Seafood Festival, “will put us over the top.” Meaning that after today, she’ll have paid off her biggest business investment to date – a Babylock



that it’ll soon warm up. All in all, it’s not a bad way to spend a workday, right?

The grass of Lake Park at 5th and Ocean is covered in a plethora of white tents, with busy vendors setting up their wares and décor in the hopes of drawing in curious craft-show enthusiasts. They’re working alongside two double-sided rows of seafood vendors, prepping for the beginning of the third day of the 24th New Jersey Annual

Esante home embroidery machine – and is now looking at a positive profit margin for the balance of 2010.

“WE’RE JUST A TRAVELING BAND”

Founded in 2005, 2Friends was initially supposed to be a short-term project between Killian and a friend, but the innovative product line of decorative embroidered key fobs, lanyards, and embroidered

About 2Friends Ribbon Gifts

Owner: Karin Killian

Location: Toms River, NJ

Company founded: 2005

Estimated 2010 sales: \$40,000+

2009 sales: \$40,000

Customer demographics: Craft-fair shoppers, online craft enthusiasts

Specific services offered: Embroidery, personalized drinkware

Secret to success: "We've got a unique product line, a solid reputation at local craft shows and repeat customers," Killian says.

cups and mugs that Killian sells to craft-show shoppers in the central New Jersey region, combined with her drive and focus, have built a successful company in this still-recovering economy.

When her friend bowed out to follow other pursuits, Killian brought her sister-in-law, Barbara Farley, into the fold to help build the business. What began as a small hobby has flowered into a thriving company that attends at 25 craft shows a year.

"You have to go where the sales are," says Killian, adding that's how she decided to first hit the craft-fair circuit that drives

her business. Craft shows were the initial focus for the business, and word-of-mouth discussions between craft vendors has driven 2Friends to seek out the most lucrative shows in the local area.

The need to keep costs down drove Killian to the Web to buy a lot of the ribbon, fabric and paper she uses for her product lines. However, she soon found that these costs were still a little too high to manage for a new business. She has since entered into a relationship with a distributor and gets much of her paper from that firm, at little above cost.

Although Killian has her embroidery machine onsite at craft shows for additional personalization, producing the products normally happens in her home office, where her entire family plays part in the work. "Space is always an issue," she says. "We definitely want to display all the letters and patterns we have in stock for potential clients. Any really special orders we handle immediately after the show."

Killian's three children, Jackson, 5, Kate, 8, and Lauren, 10, along with her husband, Frank, form an assembly line when putting together any number of the products in her inventory over the last five years. Each child takes a different part of the assembly line, depending on which product they're building. "It's a family effort," Killian says.



Daily Log

8:30 a.m.: Karin Killian and Barbara Farley leave their homes in central New Jersey.

9 a.m.: They arrive at the 24th New Jersey Annual Seafood Festival, one of the 25 craft-fair locations at they cover each year, and begin setting up their tent space.

10 a.m.: Even during setup and before the craft fair officially opens, the 2Friends Ribbon Gifts tent buzzes with interested clients.

11 a.m.: The craft fair begins in earnest and shoppers mix between the vendors. Killian and Farley call to passersby who notice their signature key fobs hanging from their wrists.

2 p.m.: Swarmed with clients by now, Killian and Farley dash from one side of the tent to the other, showing key fobs and lanyards, cup sizes and embroidery options, and taking special orders from customers. Tracking is kept of sold-out letters, designs or fabric options for all products.

5 p.m.: The craft fair ends and Killian and Farley begin to break down their sales space.

6:30 p.m.: Killian and Farley head home to tally the day's sales and begin work on the sold-out and custom-order products.

The product that both began and drives this company is a unique and functional custom embroidered key fob. The original product was made by Killian out of pre-designed cloth and her home sewing machine. After a potential client requested college sorority letters to be embroidered onto the bands, Killian set out about purchasing a home embroidery machine to customize the already-popular items.

Today, the ribbon key fobs come in not only custom colors, but also custom embroidered designs that are as unique as the product itself. Killian has extended her product line to include embroidered lanyards and ribbon watches, which can be customized on request.

Additionally, Killian has leveraged her home embroidery machine to take on paper embroidery for an entire line of creative plastic drinking cups, from sippy and baby cups to travel mugs and water bottles,

all of which can be customized with patterned paper and letters.

IT'S ALL ABOUT REPUTATION

About an hour before the craft fair officially opens, the 2Friends tent is getting some interested looks from passersby, and more than one onlooker takes to picking up the signature key fobs from stuffed bins screaming with dozens of color combinations and patterns. One such customer is Gina, a local from Ocean Township, NJ, and a return customer to the 2Friends business. A self-proclaimed “festival junkie,” Gina loves the craft show junket and makes her way up and down the shoreline following the shows.

Regarding the 2Friends signature key fobs, “I got them last year at Christmas for all my friends,” Gina says. “They loved them.” She has come back more than once to buy the handy key holders in custom patterns like ocean scenes (for herself) or any of the dozens of colors and patterns in bulk purchases of 12 or more at a time.

The embroidery work runs the gamut from initials or names to complicated designs in colors that complement the fabric used for the key fobs or the lanyards.

Looking around the tent, the explosion of color from the boxes of key fobs draws visitors first, but attention quickly turns to the cup line. Clients begin asking about custom options almost as soon as they see them. “Much of our business is repeat business, and shoppers seek us out at the shows we do year after year,” Killian says.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Working the craft-show circuit means having options for potential buyers on-hand to increase the chance of sales, so Killian takes stock during and after a show to determine what products she needs to refill, as well as any special orders made by a customer during the day. Her running list of “needs” means that her time between shows is spent replenishing stock and filling custom orders.

With word-of-mouth advertising taking the lead in her business, Killian has found that other craft-show vendors are not only open to informing her of the best shows to work, but they also share the details of each show that could be helpful for her business. The word of mouth at the shows also drives the shop to more profitable venues. “The other vendors are as diverse as those who shop the craft shows,” she says. “I’ve found



them to be a great group of people.”

Although she is hopeful that the 2Friends e-commerce site (www.2friendsribbongifts.com) will take up some of the sales slack in the future, Killian knows that there are certain shows she needs to attend – shows that offer consistent sales. “I have to go where the sales are,” she says. “Once people get the key fob in their hands, see the different designs and can pick what they want, they get it.”

One example of the face-to-face nature of the 2Friends marketing plan happens during the Seafood Festival. While talking to two potential buyers who are on their way to Atlantic City after the craft show, Farley discovers another selling point for the key fobs. “See ladies, you can use it to hold your keys while you play the slots,” she jokes with them.

The one downside of working with a traveling tent as your retail space? “The weather,” Killian says. “It’s the only part of this business that I can’t do anything about.” —*Tracie Close*

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