

tally disabled adults. I create nice personalized things for free or at a reduced price for charity groups and my favorite nonprofits. Keeping tidy records has allowed me to write off my time and products as a donation. Over the years, I've watched many Art Explorers students develop into extremely talented artists whose work I dis-

play in my home. A couple of the artists draw absolutely exquisite animals, which I've digitized and stitched on T-shirts, bags and hats. I charge minimally for the embroidery. The great thing is that I can use up those dibs and dabs I have on hand that make me crazy - the one odd-size shirt, a couple of hats left over from a big job or

those totes I overbought - and the group ends up with some inexpensive, one-of-a-kind items to sell to supplement their other more labor-intensive fundraisers. And, Art Explorers gives out my name to other businesses and potential customers as an embroiderer and "patron of the arts."

Dedicated Design-a-holic

On a quiet street in Houston, you'll find Swan Threads, sometimes in full swing at midnight. In one bedroom of Jane Swanzy's house, with some overflow to the dining room, she creates and produces custom embroidery. What started as a hobby soon became a full-time job catering to small businesses and individuals. The majority of her customers are friends, or someone a friend has referred. Most of the time she works alone, but occasionally she has help from her husband or one of the three cats that rule her house. Swanzy's business is constantly evolving as she adds services, such as heat transfers, rhinestones and promotional products. "Many of my friends have retired or are approaching retirement," she says. "I'm just now doing what I was meant to do." Contact: jane@swanzy.com.

October 24, 8:30 a.m.

I wouldn't be in the embroidery business if it weren't for Tropical Storm Allison that struck in June 2001. Our house flooded and I was in charge of repairs. By being very careful with the insurance money, there was enough left for me to buy the new sewing machine I had always wanted; I bought a Bernina with an embroidery module and was immediately addicted to machine embroidery. As soon as I started embroidering things for myself, people wanted to pay me to do it for them. My hobby turned into a part-time business very quickly. I had intended to work full-time while I built my business, but soon after delivery of my Barudan single-head in November 2004, I quit my job and devoted myself to embroidery.

My niche is small-quantity orders for businesses and custom work. Many of my customers bring me their jeans and jackets and I create something spectacular for them using embroidery, rhinestones, rhinestuds and whatever else I find that makes the work special. So, by turning lemons (the flood) into lemonade (my business), I'm a very happy person doing what I love.

October 25, 10 a.m.

When I first started my business, I had a big challenge getting my family to understand I had a real job. After a while, they began to understand what I did and respected my time. Cash flow is another challenge. I don't have open terms with the majority of my suppliers, so I have to pay before they ship to me. When I started out, my customers paid me when I delivered the goods to them. Now, I get at least a 50% deposit and, most times, complete payment before I begin the work. It was difficult for me to learn to ask for payment before I started a job, but I haven't lost a single customer because of it. I only have one customer who has terms; he pays within two weeks of delivery.

My biggest challenge is finding enough time to do it all: think of it, create it, sell it, produce it, publicize it. I'm constantly doing research for products and new ideas. And, then there's keeping my Web site (www.swanthreads.com) updated, fresh and exciting; posting to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media sites on a regular basis; and reading blogs so I can keep up with what's trendy and important. Serving on the board of my regional association and attending trade shows so I can interface with suppliers is time-consuming,

but a very important part of my schedule.

October 26, 8 a.m.

Today is machine-maintenance day. When I first got my machine, I was terrified of maintenance - all those places that needed oil or grease were overwhelming to me. But, my machine has taught me to be ambidextrous. Very quickly I learned I needed my right hand, my left hand and sometimes one of my feet to hold, turn and squirt whatever was needed. Replacing parts was also really scary. But, I learned soon enough that you can't always wait, or afford, for a tech to come replace parts. In the early days, I think I called Barudan's tech-support team so often they were flipping a coin to see who had to take my call.

Now, taking my machine apart and putting it back together are just part of my routine, and I have my own set of tools. If I were going to be anything other than an embroiderer, I'd be a machine tech. I don't regret a minute I spend on machine maintenance - my machine makes me money and deserves all the love, attention and maintenance I give it. For good luck, I always kiss Barry the Barudan when I put him back together.

October 28, 10:43 a.m.

I have a confession to make: I don't like to digitize. I bought the software and have the basic knowledge, but I just really don't enjoy creating the stitch file. It's a creative process, but digitizing, to me, is too much like doing math, which I hate. There's a certain math to this process, and it gives me a headache to

work through it. For the longest time, I felt guilty about not doing my own digitizing, but now I send almost everything out. I'll do some editing, or a simple monogram or name, but otherwise I outsource to one of my really talented digitizer contacts. My time is better spent producing the embroidery. My advice? Don't feel bad if you don't like to digitize or just aren't that good at it. Not one of my customers has ever asked if I digitized the file myself. Leave the digitizing to the pros and concentrate on what you do best.

October 29, 2 p.m.

Buying new equipment is always a difficult decision. Cost, of course, is always an issue, but finding the time to learn how to use it properly can be even more difficult. Recently, I bought a much larger, more advanced heat press. You'd think all you need to do is plug it in and use it. That isn't the case at all - temperature, pressure and time settings are all different depending on what you're pressing. Oh, and the vast array of materials available for heat pressing is mind-boggling. Just trying to figure what to use on a particular item can be very confusing. Fortunately, you don't have to struggle alone to learn all about heat-press applications. Many suppliers and industry educators offer free Webinars; I just attended a Webinar about decoration on leather goods with heat-press materials. Before this, I'd never have attempted to add leather decoration to my business. Now, I know it isn't difficult and can be a high-profit item for me.



A DAY IN THE LIFE

October 31, 7:20 a.m.

I want to buy a cutter so I can make my own templates for rhinestone transfers, but am having a difficult time deciding which machine to purchase. Over the last few months, I've been reading about several different brands, attending Webinars, searching on forums for information and talking to people who already own one. All of the cutters have good and not-so-good points. To help corral all the information, I created a spreadsheet listing the features (and user comments) of each of the machines I've been researching. Then, once I've decided what machine brand to buy, I need to choose a supplier that will offer me the training and tech support I need - this is almost as difficult as deciding on the machine. In the meantime, I'm working through a tutorial on designing rhinestone patterns in CorelDRAW. I wonder if my husband will let me put a rhinestone fish on his fishing shirt.

November 4, 10 a.m.

Hello, my name is Jane, and I'm a machine embroidery design-a-holic. I won't live long enough to sew out all the embroidery designs I own already, but I still keep buying them. Sometimes I buy designs even though I know I'll probably never stitch them on anything. I own a couple of design collections, one that came with my machine and one I bought last year, along with thousands of designs I've purchased from different design companies. Wednesday mornings I wake up and immediately check my e-mail for notices from my favorite design companies that they've posted their latest offerings on their Web sites - I have to see if there's a design or two I just can't live without.

Keeping track of these designs is a problem. I've set up folders on my computer where I save the designs when I purchase them. Wouldn't it be nice if our computers had a voice-recognition program that would take you directly to the file when you say, "Embroidery design of a cute cat with Christmas decorations?" It's so tempting to buy lots of stock designs, especially when you're first starting out in the business. Resist, and buy only the designs you need when you need them. It doesn't take long to sink a lot of money into designs you may never use. Don't become a design-a-holic like me.

November 7, 9:24 a.m.

Have you ever thought about entering a decorated apparel competition,

but decided not to because you thought it was a waste of time? These competitions are well worth the time you spend on submissions. Days of left-chest corporate logos numb my creative mind. Competitions energize me and, if I win, give me a great marketing opportunity. Recently, I won a *Stitches* Golden Needle Award in the embroidery "Best Use of Stock Design" category. I posted the news of my win on Facebook and Twitter, and sent e-mail announcements to customers and friends. I'll get more business out of this than running an ad in the local paper would ever bring me. It cost me less than \$40 (and a couple hours of my time) to produce this competition piece. The *Stitches* Golden Needle Awards is the first competition I've won where I get a prize (merchandise from Gildan), and I'm turning this prize into another marketing opportunity: I'm decorating the T-shirts and donating them to the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo School Art Committee's Quick Draw Contest for the students to wear during the competition.

November 9

I've decided which cutter I want to buy, but it isn't in my budget to get it yet. I did purchase the software for that cutter, though, installed it and starting watching the training DVD yesterday. Until I can afford my cutter, I plan to create my own templates and have someone else cut them for me. I was making myself crazy trying to figure out how to get the cutter and the software at the same time. Finally, I realized I could do this in steps. Learn the software first. Contract out the template cutting. Sell the rhinestone-enhanced items. Make enough money to buy my own cutter.

Like the adage, "Sometimes you can't see the forest for the trees," I was concentrating so much on the trees that I was missing the forest. Fortunately, I have a friend with a compatible cutter who lives about 15 miles from me. One thing I've discovered about rhinestones is the inconsistency of the sizing depending on the purchase source. I ordered a template that the supplier wound up cutting twice for me and it still doesn't fit the stones I have. Using my friend's cutter, we can make sure that the template and the stones will work together. I can't wait until I learn the software and start producing my own transfers: I have customers waiting on me to bling them.

Decorator Mom



Jodi Henry, owner of Foley, MI-based Henry Embroidery & Screen Printing, opened her business in 2000 with a single-head, single-needle machine and went part-time in her job as a physical therapist for six months. Over the next few years, Henry added screen-printing equip-

ment, an Ioline cutter and software, appliqué and twill cutting - with one part-time employee to help out with the embroidery.

"In 2005, our business had grown to a point that we knew it needed to move out of the basement of our home," Henry says. "We drew up plans that included converting our existing three-car garage and an addition into an attached shop." She's been working full-time out of this 2,000-square-foot space since early 2006, with five part-time employees who work the screen-printing and embroidery equipment. "I take care of scheduling, artwork, shipping and delivery, order entry, customer service, accounts receivable, accounts payable and all of the other tasks that a business owner gets to deal with - and our three children," she says. In the past year Henry added three embroidery machines, for a total of six single-heads, and a Brother GT-541 garment printer. Contact: jodi@henryesp.com.

October 26, 9:02 p.m.

I dropped the kids off at school at 8 a.m. I've got no employees scheduled today, which gives me the day to get organized and prep for the week. I took a quick peek at the calendar - two meetings and two volunteer commitments to schedule around - and the job list, and came up with a plan of attack.

Two small embroidery jobs needed to be finished as soon as possible, so I took care of those first. One was a list of names on 18 heavy cotton work jackets. We ran the 52,000-stitch back designs last week, so as soon as the names were on they were ready for pick-up. I also ran a sample of a really cool multimedia design for the youth group of a local church. I prepped five jobs for tomorrow - one list of left-chest names on jackets for a bridal party, a box of left-chest logos for a bank, two full-front twill appliqué designs and one reverse appliqué for sweatshirts.

We've increased our number of embroidery heads, and we try to run a mix of short-sew and long-sew jobs to maximize our production. Trying to run six machines on names or short-sew left-chest designs leads to ineffective multitasking. I still need to cut the twill for tomorrow's jobs and prep for the screen-printing department before bed tonight, but overall it's been a fairly productive day. Having jobs prepped before my employees arrive in the morning allows me to hand over the production work and spend my time doing quotes, invoicing, artwork and deliveries.

November 3, 7:10 p.m.

I wasn't nearly as effective last week as I would