



Business Journal photo by LEE R. AKS

Donna Chambers and master jeweler Virgilio Thomas discuss design ideas.

Burning out ...

Donna Chambers is trying to recapture that old entrepreneurial magic

By DOREEN D. FITZPATRICK

The word "entrepreneur" evokes a sense of adventure, enthusiasm and magic. But after awhile, even the most devoted small-business person can begin to burn out.

Over the past 13 years, Donna Chambers has grown two businesses in Westchester. Though successful, she suddenly finds herself at a crossroads, wondering how she can recapture some of the magic of being an entrepreneur.

Chambers, the owner and president of That Old Black Magic in White Plains, said lately it's the little things that are getting to her. "Some days it's those little problems that a small-business person faces that are exhausting," things like paperwork, staffing issues and business

procedures. Those nagging concerns are in addition to the usual worries every business owner has, such as increasing cash flow and holding down expenses.

It's not that business isn't good; That Old Black Magic, an ethnic gift shop on Mamaroneck Avenue, will soon celebrate its fifth anniversary. And Donna Chambers Designs Inc., a fine jewelry design company, is nearly 13 years old. Both companies have sustained steady growth: The jewelry business grossed more than \$350,000 last year, and the gift shop had approximately \$300,000 in gross sales.

Despite having a manager for each operation, Chambers said, "I'm constantly generating business, going to

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HOW'S
Business?



Donna Chambers

President, That Old Black Magic; Donna Chambers Designs Inc.

Age: 45

Single; one daughter, Cori, 10.; lives in Elmsford.

Education: Bachelor of fine arts, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn.

Awards: 1992 Women's Jewelry Association's award, Excellence in Manufacturing; 1995 Blenheim Award for Design Excellence.

Hobbies: Spending time with Cori; baking, cake decorating (she's taken classes at the Culinary Institute of America), and all kinds of crafts: "I make a lot of things found in the shop."

changing over the years," she said, "and it started taking a turn downward. Consumers didn't have as much disposable income" as they had in previous years. That meant working twice as hard to maintain her sales volume, while continuing to design new pieces.

In response to the change in customers'

spending habits, Chambers said she decided to do something a little different to keep her employees working. In 1990 she started a mail order endeavor, eventually producing five

different catalogs of ethnic art, gifts and collectibles. That also was the year she decided to invest \$25,000 of her savings in That Old Black Magic.

Like most retail operations, she said, "The store is very seasonal. The busiest time is from November through December. After that, there really isn't anything you can count on, other than Mother's Day, so you really have to capitalize on the holiday season."

To maximize sales during that period, for the past three years Chambers has rented a cart in The Galleria in White Plains. "I have a very specialized product that's not sold in the malls. The cart costs me \$10,000

to rent for the two months, but it's generated sales of over \$50,000."

Chambers also has sold jewelry at fine crafts shows, and expanded the reach of the gift shop to include book signings and community cultural events, all in an effort to sustain sales and her success.

"As a business person you have to have an open mind, allow things to come in to it, and leave yourself with options. You can't do just one thing," said Chambers.

"You have to diversify to keep your business growing and going. Sometimes I think the answer for me is to go seasonal. Maybe I should take two or three carts in different malls throughout the area.

"But I don't have time to settle on one option. I'd like to see myself grow creatively, to be appreciated as an artist. I've got to do something to put the spark back in it.

"You're always sure you can fail, but never sure you can succeed. I'm just tired of working so hard." Yet when asked if she'd give up her businesses, Chambers responded, "No. What else would I do after 15 years in business for myself?"

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