

## Harrington: Furniture gives way to candles

By Carly Harrington  
Friday, December 28, 2007

For nearly six years, Monica Sheppard has bought, traded and sold used furniture at her Fountain City store, Furniture Traders.

You could kind of say it's in her genes.

Sheppard, 37, is the great-great-niece of Will Mast, the North Carolina businessman whose original country store became known, as it is today, as the Mast General Store.

"Almost everyone in the Mast family was a teacher, homemaker or a merchant. I got a little bit of all of it going on," said Sheppard, a mother of four who has held a variety of jobs including selling jewelry and teaching. "I've always loved furniture and antiques. I love to find a bargain. It's genetic."

The Mast family is no longer part of the chain of stores, one of which is on Gay Street. The business stayed in the family through three generations until it was sold in the 1970s.

Sheppard, who admits she hasn't visited the downtown Mast store, is the only descendant living in Knoxville. But her family's entrepreneurial spirit continues at her own store, at 5014 N. Broadway.

Sheppard and her husband, Todd, developed a business plan early in their marriage because "I always knew I wanted to own my own business, and the timing was just right."

But what started as a furniture store has evolved into more of a candle store.

To help diffuse a distinct smell of old and used furniture, Sheppard began using and selling candles that she ordered from someone else. Shipping was getting expensive, though, and Sheppard felt she could make a better candle.

So in 2004, Sheppard and her husband, who works at Thermocopy, set out to educate themselves on how to make soy candles. For months, they tested candle after candle, fragrance after fragrance.

"We wanted a product that performed well," she said.

The pair worked right out of their own kitchen. The project eventually got so big, they knocked out the wall between the kitchen and dining room.

In July 2005, Sheppard launched Beanstalk Soy Candles. In January, she moved her candle-making process into the back of her furniture shop.

Sales from her candles now represent about 75 percent of the business, which she sells retail, wholesale and at craft shows. She also has a program for those who want to sell the candles for fundraising.

Sheppard has 18 fragrances of soy candles, some of which are seasonal. Her two most popular are Fireside Holiday and Very Vanilla. (I liked Jungle Rain.)

The biggest challenge, she said, is having enough time to create the product she sells.

"It's all homemade. I just don't open a catalogue and restock the shelves," said Sheppard, who had the biggest holiday season yet for her candles.

While she stays busy raising her four children, including three-year-old twins, Sheppard said she finds her work rewarding, especially when people come back because they found a product they like.

"It feeds my creative spirit," she said.

Business writer and The Bottom Line columnist Carly Harrington may be reached at 865-342-6317 or harringtonc@knews.com.

