

# Nation's Business®

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## Sewing Up Success

By Mark Richard Moss

**R**udy Shepard was trained as a mechanical engineer, and his wife, Sharon, was a data processor. But Rudy has taken Sharon's hobby—sewing—to a level that would be the envy of any small-business owner. Sales for Soft Stitch, their Greensboro, N.C., company, reached \$250,000 last year and are expected to surpass \$300,000 this year.

Rudy Shepard's path from designing valves used in cryogenics (as a \$40,000-a-year employee at an engineering firm) to running a successful alterations and embroidery business was charted by his wife's avocation and his desire to be his own boss.

Sharon says she was in seventh grade when a woman making church ushers' uniforms told her: "Sharon, if you want to learn how, I will teach you." With the woman's help, Sharon made her own uniform. "That's where it started," she says. Her father bought her her first sewing machine when she was 14.

Today, the couple's business has embroidery contracts with, among others, Procter & Gamble, AMP Inc. (an electrical-products manufacturer in Harrisburg, Pa.), and AT&T. It also does work for many smaller customers such as schools and clubs.

Rudy graduated from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 1985 and worked in that city for five years; Sharon was a data-processing employee for a Charlotte bank. In 1990 he accepted a job in the Greensboro area. They moved there and bought a house. Sharon left the job market to have a baby and then returned to work for another bank.

Because Rudy was making more money than Sharon, it didn't make financial sense for him to quit and pursue his entrepreneurial dream, he says while facing a mountain of work on his desk at the front of the couple's noisy shop. They concluded that before he could make such a move,

*Mark Richard Moss is a free-lance writer in Winston-Salem, N.C.*

they would have to find something for Sharon that would increase her income.

That something was a small alterations shop that the couple bought in late 1991 for \$30,000, with financing help from the former owner and a bank loan. Sharon quit the bank and ran the shop—which they named Soft Stitch—while Rudy continued working at the engineering firm.

Within six months, the owner of a dry-cleaning business that was one of Soft

Stitch's customers told the Shepards about his plans to open a dry-cleaning shop in nearby Burlington, where Rudy worked. Would they be interested in opening an alterations shop at the new site? They accepted the offer, and the proximity of the second shop to his job allowed Rudy to manage the new operation while still maintaining his full-time responsibilities.



With a thriving alterations and embroidery business, Rudy and Sharon Shepard are realizing material gains.

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During their first two years in business, the Shepards received a number of requests for monograms—work they had to farm out for lack of equipment. Rudy fig-

ured that if he owned his own embroidery machine, he could teach himself to do monogramming and embroidery. Initially, the \$25,000 price tag for a single-head unit was much more than Soft Stitch could afford. But nearly a year later, in late 1993, they bought a machine, with financing by the manufacturer.

Rudy learned to monogram and embroider, and he filled orders at night. He bought a pickup truck and took his embroidery machine on the road, visiting weekend events such as fishing tournaments and football games. He offered on-site embroidery and took orders.

With business increasing, the firm acquired a second machine in 1994 and, the

following year, a larger pickup and a 12-by-6-foot enclosed trailer to accommodate more equipment. With Rudy's responsibilities growing, the Shepards sold the Burlington shop, and in 1996 he left the engineering firm.

Today, Soft Stitch employs eight people and keeps three embroidery machines humming. Sharon runs the alterations operation, and Rudy estimates that the two sides of the business—alterations

and embroidery—generate equal portions of the firm's income. He hopes to move the embroidery operation to an industrial park and increase the number of machines.

Asked if he misses being an engineer, Rudy says he does miss having a regular income. Although he's co-owner of a thriving business, he says: "I'm always worried about a steady paycheck. I think maybe it should stay that way. If I stop worrying about it, and I stop looking, then all of a sudden it'll stop coming." ■

**Soft Stitch**  
**Rudy & Sharon Shepard, Owners**  
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