



Sewn In

By Brian Young

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Karen Comstock, owner of Quiltricks, is an entrepreneur you would like to know.

Without having taken a single course in business, sales, or marketing, she has built one of the most successful quilt design businesses in the Southeastern United States.

We sat down to talk in Cary's Panera restaurant on a recent sunny North Carolina afternoon.

Comstock began quilting as early as the age of ten. Her career made a natural progression after she finished a quilt for her family upon getting married.

"Most people who ask me for a quilt have no idea of how long it takes," she said. "It has taken me longer than a year on some projects, and that involves working many hours every day."

The origin of quilting is commonly believed to have been for the utility of soldiers for warmth and protection from chafing from heavy armor, rather than decoration. There are many families who can tell the stories behind quilts that have been passed down from generation to generation. Comstock created her company, Quiltricks, in 2005, because she loves to use her hands. If you visit Quiltricks.com, you will be struck by the motto on the home page: "Evoking generations of hands putting needle to fabric." Even though Comstock



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has long done quilting as a hobby, she has held various jobs, such as doing alterations and being a church administrator.

Comstock made the decision to start her own business because she could not meet the demand for “the Quiltrick wallet” she was selling at craft shows. Buyers would approach her and say they loved the product but then add: “I just wish it was available in brown and orange.” She hit upon the idea to write up the pattern so that her customers could make it in whatever colors they wished. It would turn out to be a critical business decision.

Sixteen years have passed since that day and Quiltricks is going strong. Like any entrepreneur, Karen Comstock is always looking for innovations, ways to perfect her craft. She often finds inspiration from others. She learned that teaching her designs in small classes—originally at Quilting Connection, a local quilt store in Ames, Iowa—led her to meet receptive students, mostly women, who were eager to create her designs.

In 2003, her family relocated to Cary, North Carolina, when her husband, Gary, took a job as a college professor at North Carolina State University. Comstock quickly became close friends with a group of women who formed a quilting bee that met in her living room. They encouraged her to market her work. “I said ok, and it snowballed from there,” Comstock stated.

Her ability to create new patterns, including her most recent best-sellers, “Holly Glow” and “Jeepers Creepers,” stems from what she is doing at that particular moment and seeing a need to be met. She enjoys creating a range of items, from simple patterns for beginners to the most challenging designs for veteran seamstresses. Comstock also creates seasonal and holiday patterns, called notions. They include her “Luminaria” wall hanging for Christmas, “Give Thanks” table runner for Thanksgiving, and “If I Could Choose,” throw pillow. She even has patterns for a laptop computer carrying bag and a backpack!



“Writing it up is another story...”

Quiltricks sells the patterns that Comstock creates, allowing her to base her prices off of printing cost and distribution method. Being able to look at what the market is charging for patterns that are similar to hers also helps as well. “Believe it or not my favorite isn’t exactly one that would sell the best for me,” Comstock exclaims. Unfortunately, Comstock never had the opportunity to meet her grandmother. She did however create a spin-off of one of her grandmother’s patterns which she named Anna’s Rose, as a tribute to her. Her two best selling products are the wallets and purses she makes which are technically sewing patterns, but she enjoys creating those just as much as she does quilting.

While it may not take her long to create new designs, writing the method for others to recreate the design takes a great deal of time. “Writing it up is another story because people have to be able to understand the way I write things,” she says. “I have people proofread what I’ve written and I like to use people who are not advance sewers test the pattern to see how easy it is to comprehend.” This tedious process can take anywhere from six months to a year for before she feels comfortable launching the release of a new pattern.

Even though quilting is a niche market Quiltricks has a very broad target audience that the company can cater to, even though Comstock admits that the average quilter is around the age of 55. Along with selling her patterns from her own website Comstock has also networked to sell her products in quilt stores around the country. Comstock finds it relaxing when she has the opportunity to quilt by hand but rarely gets that opportunity with business currently being so steady. She has to use machines to meet her deadlines but the actual quilting is the last process as you piece things together by hand or machine. “Now-a-days they have expensive long-arm machines that can do this step for you. When I finish really big quilts, I send it off to one of my colleagues,” she says.

However, the steady stream of business has also lessened the time she has to do personal custom orders as well. As an award-winning and published designer,



"I would not want to be doing anything else"

Comstock often travels to trade shows that last 2-3 days around the country. This allows potential customers of different areas the opportunity to see her samples and purchase her patterns.

She also speaks at events called "trunk shows." She finished a Midwest tour in September with appearances in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and will be touring Florida and South Carolina in February. She has enjoyed discussing her work with audiences ever since she began teaching way back in Iowa. The bar was set high from the start as she asked her to teach a class once a month but wanted Comstock to present a original design each class. Even though she felt it was a bit of a naïve decision at the time it opened the door for her to teach in other aspects related to quilting. Upon her arrival in Cary, she immediately went to Etc. Crafts, a Cary quilt store, to ask if she could continue teaching. When the store owner gave her approval, Comstock set up shop.

After three years of existence, Quiltricks already boasts 24 original designs all created by Comstock. The release of new products comes more when she has the chance to finish them but she does try to release a few each year. Networking has played a critical role in the steady stream of business but the company retains customers through updates on Quiltricks.com, sending out newsletters and Comstock speaking at local stores as she travels. Comstock prefers the company to continue its steady slow growth but would like to get to a point where she would not have to travel as much. One important factor of that continued growth is being aware of what suppliers are providing the best prices on a wholesale and individual buying basis. "Unless you're full of money you do research on the web and talk to other designers to find the most reasonable price," she stated. "And, as hard as the work is, I would not want to be doing anything else."

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