

## **Judy T's**

She describes herself as meek. Judy says she enjoys writing short stories and poetry, meeting new people, and sharing her message of fairness and equity. Judy spent 15 years in the sheltered workshop and would rarely leave her home during the winter.

But, in October of 2000, Judy met Dan Wilkins, owner of The Nth Degree who sold advocacy t-shirts. So intrigued and excited about the message Mr. Wilkins was spreading, Judy wanted to be a part of it.

She approached Allegan County Community Mental Health (ACCMH) in Michigan to help her explore ways she could work with her idea. Judy started to realize her dream in November 2000 by negotiating to sell Mr. Wilkins t-shirts on a commission basis.

By late August 2001 and with the business and marketing consulting supports offered from ACCMH, Judy developed a business plan and acquired a DBA (Doing Business As) name of *Judy T's*. She started the expansion of her business by renegotiating with Mr. Wilkins to sell his t-shirts on a contract basis.

ACCMH committed to provide business consultation, initial transportation services, fading direct supports, and to help facilitate employing a business helper.

Judy was able to take out a loan for \$2,550 based on having a solid business plan and her contract with The Nth Degree. She used this loan to purchase inventory, liability insurance, and related items needed to store and display her merchandise.

Marketing and expansion strategies Judy identified included selling her t-shirts at conferences, establishing retail sites, introducing novelty items, catalog sales, bidding for group sales, and purchasing a portable embroidery machine to customize orders at conferences.

Judy T's first retail site was located in a popular, local coffee and bookstore. Aside from giving Judy the retail space for a small percentage of sales, the bookstore owner included Judy's t-shirts in her advertising.

Judy had also decided to take a part-time wage job at a screen-printing store in Otsego, MI. This opportunity ended up being two fold. Judy was able to expand her business by setting up her second retail display in the screen-printing store.

Jumping in with both feet, Judy began attending conferences to promote her business and sell her products. Initially, Judy was supported by a staff member from ACCMH when attending events. Judy and her support person would take turns covering the display to ensure there was always someone there to greet the customers. As her business grew, ACCMH support faded and Judy hired an assistant to provide any support needed.

Within the first two years of her business, Judy had attended eleven events, completed two bid sales of over 100 shirts each, and was in negotiations for a possible 2000 shirt order. She traveled to conferences in Lawrence, Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Traverse City, MI to sell her shirts. At an average sale per conference of 31 shirts sold at \$15 each, Judy's gross sales averaged \$465 per conference.

Last year, Judy taking her first airplane ride, attended the National APSE conference in San Diego, CA. She was accompanied by an assistant who proved not to be as "strong" as originally thought. So Judy grew in independence, as she, by herself, readied for the conference each morning. When arriving back home, Judy fired that assistant and hired another employee.

Wanting to give her customers an added value, Judy requested assistance from Michigan Rehabilitation Service (Vocational Rehabilitation). They offered Judy \$1,200 in financial support to purchase a portable embroidery machine, a membership with the area Chamber of Commerce, assorted signage to market products, and to cover the initial costs of buying a credit card imprinter and services. Judy now takes the embroidery machine to conferences. For an additional fee, she will customize her t-shirts while her customers are attending their conference sessions, and can take credit cards for payment.

Judy was also asked to co-present at the TASH conference in Chicago last December. Judy took full advantage of this opportunity to sell her shirts.

Judy has achieved most of her original business goals over the last three years and has reached some goals she had not anticipated. Judy vacationed in Las Vegas with friends. Though not impressed with the glitz or the heat, it was an experience she will not soon forget.

Judy now sells her shirts wholesale to fundraising groups and had gross sales in excess of \$5,000 in 2003. Still to come, Judy would like to develop her own writing medium to sell poetry and short stories, and introduce her own t-shirt logos.

Judy T's Mission Statement:

"Judy T's will maintain, good, quality shirts for potential customers. Not only does selling the shirts satisfy my financial gratification, but it satisfies my personal gratification of making new friends in the business community. Most importantly, I want people to think of respecting others when buying the shirts."

The processes and techniques used to assist Judy were developed in-whole or in-part with the Rural Institute while ACCMH was a site for the U.S. Dept. of Education funded Rural Entrepreneurship and Self Employment Expansion Design project (RESEED).

Produced in collaboration with Allegan County Community Mental Health and Griffin-Hammis Associates, LLC ([www.griffinhammis.com](http://www.griffinhammis.com)).