

Washington Business

Small Business

Getting Dolled Up for a Commute—and a Career

Entrepreneur Turns a Ride Into Marketing Opportunity

By Steven Ginsberg
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For most Washington area commuters, the trek to and from work each day is nothing more than a necessary hassle. Yet to Barbara El Wilson, it's an opportunity to market her small-business concept.

Three mornings a week, the Silver Spring resident drives from her home to the Wheaton Metro stop. From there she rides the Red Line train downtown to the Farragut North stop. She then walks a half dozen blocks east to her part-time job at 13th and K streets NW.

Along the way, Wilson prominently carries what she hopes will become her business enterprise in a large African-style basket over her shoulder—an original line of handmade ethnic rag dolls. Wilson totes around her dolls, which are called Sugarfoots, to and from work and on her lunch hour as a way to advertise the dolls.

"It's a unique way of showing the dolls consistently," Wilson said. "Walking at lunch, riding on the Metro, any exposure so I can pound the name Sugarfoots into your head."

Wilson says that people routinely stop her to comment on the dolls and inquire about purchasing them. Wilson estimates that she hands out about 30 business cards a day to inquiring passersby.

Sugarfoots are intended to emulate cultures of various countries and regions, such as Jamaica and West Africa. Wilson got the ideas for most of the outfit designs while in a former job at the World Bank.

"I temped at the World Bank for years," said Wilson, who also used to act in local theaters and perform stand-up comedy. "People from all over the world would come through there. I would see Indian women wearing beautiful saris . . . and it occurred to me that every ethnic group had these beautiful clothes." Wilson also crafted many of the African outfits based on observations on a trip she took to West Africa in 1988.

The Sugarfoots dolls come in two sizes—with each taking from five to six hours to make—in shades of cocoa, ginger or cinnamon. The girl doll comes in a dress with contrasting pinafore and pantaloons, while the boy doll has oversized overalls with a contrasting shirt and kufi hat, an African-style cap. Both boy and girl dolls come in traditional Rastafarian styles as well.

Wilson started the company in 1992 and has sold about 100 dolls a year at a cost of \$39.95 for the small models and \$49.95 for the large ones. Wilson financed her company with about \$2,000 from personal savings and "those things called plastic," and has virtually broken even in the first four years.

With little capital, Wilson has had to limit her marketing to word-of-mouth promotion and ads in the Yellow Pages and the City Paper. In October Sugarfoots added a World Wide Web site, which has provided the company with a relatively inexpensive avenue for reaching potential customers. Though Wilson hasn't tallied how many hits her Web site gets a day, it has led to many inquiries, including orders from Japan, Hawaii and Bermuda, she said.

What makes the dolls stand out is their colors, she said. "These are not like your average rag dolls," Wilson said. "They come in the brightest, most vibrant colors. Every culture is represented by vibrant colors and I wanted the dolls to show that." For example, the Rasta dolls are decked out in vivid red, gold and green.

But, for Wilson, there is a limit to the colors and designs from both a marketing and personal standpoint. "I wanted them to have a crossover



Barbara El Wilson says her handmade dolls are starting to gain recognition from commuters.

feel. My roots may be in Africa, but I was born in America and I'm still an American," Wilson said. "One way to incorporate the ethnic fabric is to take the ethnic print and tone it down a bit with a solid color for a hat or pants."

After four years, Wilson's ideas and efforts seem to be taking off. Before final Christmas sales were tallied, she filled three times as many orders as she had a year ago, she estimated.

"I was told when I started that this was the kind of thing that would take five years to show a profit," Wilson said. "Well, I'm starting the fifth year and it's about time we start seeing something."

She adds, half-jokingly, "Otherwise, I'll have to focus on getting a real job."

Additionally, Wilson's street hawking is starting to turn some heads. She has been called everything from "sweetfoot," the "doll lady," the "lady with a basket," and "Barbara and her day care center," Wilson said.

"You know when it's not working," Wilson

said. "But I can feel it beginning to pick up steam. Somebody came up to me in Eastern Market and said, 'Hey, you're the Sugarfoot lady.' I'm starting to get that all the time."

As rewarding as operating the entire business by herself can be, Wilson hopes to change that someday.

"It's just me, the Yellow Pages, a Web site and my right calloused hand," Wilson said, adding, "and I got it going on with my right bicep," a reference to the 12-pound bag she totes around.

If her ultimate goal of mass-marketing the dolls is achieved, Wilson would have a new problem: devising a way to maintain the homemade quality and feel of the dolls.

For now, though, Wilson is energized by a product she believes in and the potential money it could provide. "The dolls smile just as big as I do," she said. "I wanted to make sure they had a big smile. When I get on the Metro and I see grumpy people break out in a smile, it's so cool because I know they're reacting to my doll." ■ 9