

# When life hit skids, entrepreneur hit the button

By Toni Radler  
Special correspondent

**W**hen Jennifer Yane's life hit the skids, she didn't hit the panic button.

Instead, she started making them — panic buttons, that is. Inspirational buttons, humorous buttons, and most of all, buttons for people such as herself — people recovering from alcohol and drug abuse or other forms of addiction or compulsion.

What started out five years ago as a cottage industry in one room of Ms. Yane's house is now Jennifer Unlimited, a growing business in a small building on Hampstead Avenue in western Henrico County.

Jennifer Unlimited, which makes buttons and sells them wholesale and retail, has doubled sales every year. This year the business showed a profit for the first time.

How Jennifer Unlimited came into being is not so much an account of sound business strategy, but rather a journey toward self-discovery that began 10 years ago when Ms. Yane's marriage broke up.

"Things were really bad for me. At the time, a friend mentioned that her family was getting help through a recovery group for substance abuse. She suggested I come to a meeting and I did," she said.

"I couldn't identify with the quantities (of drugs and alcohol) they described. But I could recognize the feelings they talked about as my own. I felt inadequate. I felt like I was a bad person. I felt rage, which was really a lot of pain covered over by anger," Ms. Yane recalled.

"I didn't have the adequate tools at the time for dealing with my feelings as they came up — tools like learning to identify a feeling as I felt it; learning to share that feeling in a non-blaming way; learning to form a network of friends; learning to depend on a power greater than myself, instead of feeling I had to do everything.

"I learned that a lot of people have these feelings and problems and that there are ways to change, that things could be different."

She also learned that she had a substance addiction problem. Using the "tools" she acquired through recovery groups, Ms. Yane set aside alcohol and marijuana and mustered the courage to go to art school at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"It was a lifelong dream that I had been afraid to fulfill. Even though I had always been told I was a very good artist, I was afraid of the competition and I was afraid that I wasn't good enough. But I found that I belonged there, in art school, just as much as anyone else did."

With a daughter to support, Ms. Yane completed school with the help of scholarships.

"There have been so many little miracles along the way during my recovery, I'm skimming over them. But one thing happened — I went to the Women's Resource Center at the University of Richmond to see what scholarships were available," she said.

"My money had run out and to be in school, I had to have a scholarship. I found there were two scholarships available for women over 25 in the Richmond area. But the deadline was the very next day. So I had to fill out the applications right there and write an essay on why I should get a scholarship. It just flowed out of me," she recalled.

She got the scholarship and later obtained another, which helped her through school.

While in college, Ms. Yane undertook a student teaching assignment. Her adviser urged her to try St. Catherine's School, a Richmond private school for girls, although Ms. Yane thought she wanted to do her student teaching in public schools.

"It turned out to be such an excellent experience. St. Catherine's was just what I needed."

It was at St. Catherine's that Ms. Yane was introduced to a button-making machine.

She became fascinated by the little hand-operated machine that presses designs into disc-shaped buttons. She bought a machine and started making buttons to sell at craft fairs and conventions.

The buttons displayed Ms. Yane's hand-colored designs and had slogans aimed mainly at people recovering from a variety of addictions, such as substance abuse, compulsive gambling and compulsive overeating.

The slogans included "I love hood altering hugs," "The road to success is always under construction," and "Courage is fear that has said its prayers."

But Ms. Yane still thought she only was dabbling. She didn't consider selling buttons a business until she was



Alexa Welch/The Richmond News Leader

**Ms. Yane learned how to make buttons while working as a student teacher.**

"discovered" at an Arts in The Park art and craft show at Byrd Park.

"I didn't sell much that day. But I did draw a big crowd. And one couple seemed particularly interested in my buttons," she said.

The couple turned out to be owners of a franchised religious bookstore.

"They were so excited about my buttons, they wanted me to produce a catalog they could take to a convention," Ms. Yane recalled. "At that time, I had designed 300 buttons. But I hadn't cataloged them in any way. I had only two weeks to do it in. But I got the catalog out in time."

The catalog was an important step for Ms. Yane because it gave her a tool for marketing her buttons.

Her next big break came two years ago, when Elliott Brown, owner of The Sober Camel, a chain of stores in Massachusetts, saw Ms. Yane's buttons advertised in a magazine and ordered more than \$300 in buttons.

"I was thrilled. It was a huge order at the time. Now it would be average," she said.

Later, at a conference for children of alcoholics, Brown and Ms. Yane shared a booth and sold 1,500 buttons.

Now her buttons are distributed coast to coast in stores and gift shops that specialize in inspirational merchandise and items for recovering alcoholics and drug abusers. The company's orders range from one button to 10,000, and the

company has nearly 500 different titles of buttons.

The growth of the business has brought some changes. Ms. Yane began hiring part-time employees two years ago to fill orders. She also saw a need to move her business out of her home. Buttons occupied a spare room and overflowed into the dining and living rooms.

Ms. Yane found a building off West Broad Street for her office and hired one of her part-time workers, Marianne Ringlesbach, as office manager.

The company also has two other part-time employees who make buttons in their homes. The company has three machines that produce buttons in different sizes.

The company now makes buttons for businesses and non-profit organizations, in addition to its buttons with inspirational messages.

Looking back on the past several years, Ms. Yane said she can see a pattern to her life.

"The poverty I went through at first was a blessing. If I had started out with a new car, a good job, and all that stuff, I couldn't have afforded to take a chance," she said. "Because I started out with very little, I didn't have to make sacrifices."

"When I first started making buttons, some people would say, 'Jennifer, this is just a fad. It's going to come and go.'"

"But making these inspirational buttons was real important for me and my recovery. So I didn't listen to the negative stuff. I just kept going through the doors that opened for me." ♦