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Custom jewelry maker Tonya Barlow Taking care of business—at home

By Debbie Stringer

When Tonya Barlow was pregnant with her first child, she dreamed of quitting her job at a veterinary hospital to care for her baby at home in French Camp.

She and her husband, Scott, knew the loss of her income would be a hardship for their young family. But she was determined to start exploring some creative options. “I kept assuring him that I could try to find something to make some money,” she said.

Barlow has always had a knack for crafts. So in July 2001, the month before her baby was due, she started making candles and jewelry to sell at craft shows. When candles turned out to be too cumbersome to haul from show to show, she began concentrating on jewelry—beaded necklaces, watch bands, earrings and bracelets. Two years later, she started monogramming sterling silver pendants with a small manual engraver.

Then, in 2006, Barlow took her home-based business to the next step with the purchase of a computerized engraving machine. Learning to use the machine’s design software was tricky, but with practice she was soon producing elegant monograms on wooden pendants. She hung them on necklaces made of big, chunky beads or shiny gemstone chips, all chosen at random.

The combination was a hit with craft

show customers. “They started selling, then they started selling like crazy,” Barlow said.

Although she didn’t realize it, she had just hit upon the design that would define her style as a personalized jewelry maker and propel her production into a full-time business.

During most of this time, the Barlows were serving as houseparents in a girls’ dorm at French Camp Academy. She assembled jewelry in the living room before moving her growing collection of beads and equipment into a tiny storage closet her husband cleared out for her.

Barlow was marketing her work through shows, home parties and word of mouth when she decided to start a Web site in August 2007. “By that time, I had had baby No. 3. People were calling me all day and all night, and I just couldn’t keep up,” she said.

Online orders starting coming in even before the Web site was completed, to Barlow’s astonishment. “It was amazing, and it hasn’t really slowed down since then.”

With sales soaring, Barlow desperately needed help. Her sister, Tera Varner, a member of Delta Electric Power Association, agreed to quit her job and help out in the business.

Still, Barlow faced a tough decision. She could no longer be a full-time mom, a houseparent at French Camp and an



entrepreneur. “I had to give up something,” she said.

So, she left French Camp in May and moved her business into the home she and her husband recently bought and are renovating. One room, painted a bright blue, is devoted to jewelry making, with thousands of beads stashed in drawers and supplies shelved in a walk-in closet.

The sisters work hardest when their children are in school, yet they keep their schedules flexible to allow time to attend school events.

“A lot of times I work at night after work tables where Barlow and Varner string beads and personalize wood, shell and acrylic pendants for necklaces and earrings, as well as picture frames, wallets and pocketknives.

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Tonya Barlow (at left, left photo) holds the beaded necklaces she creates with help from her sister, Tera Varner (right). Barlow and Varner personalize the jewelry with pendants engraved with the buyers’ choice of monogram. Barlow wears an example of an engraved wooden pendant; Varner wears engraved shell jewelry (close-up at far left).

the kids go to bed because it’s quiet,” Barlow said.

She now limits craft show appearances to the Canton Flea Market (where her booth has occupied the same spot for eight years), the Neshoba County Fair, the Natchez Trace Festival

and French Camp’s May Day.

In the summer, Barlow and Varner put in two long days a week to fill orders so they can spend more time with their children.

Of all the lessons Barlow has learned in growing her business, maybe the most important is the need to set a deadline for accepting Christmas orders. “We were



getting 50 to 100 orders every day for three weeks before Christmas. I’d be in here working until 1 or 2 in the morning, and get back up at 5,” Barlow said.

One Christmas Eve her children crept into her workroom to ask if there would be a tree and gifts. “That broke my heart,” she said.

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is a good “problem” to have. She’s grateful she doesn’t have to “beat the streets and beg people to buy my stuff anymore.”

Most of all, she and her sister appreciate the opportunity to schedule their working hours around the needs of their family.

“Between the two of us, we get the

kids handled and the jewelry done,” Barlow said.

For more information, visit Tonya Barlow’s Web site, tonyabarlow.com, e-mail tonya-barlow@hotmail.com or call (662) 770-0071. Barlow’s jewelry can be ordered from displays at some area retailers; see her Web site for details.



From a stash of thousands (left), Barlow selects beads at random when creating a necklace, unless the buyer requests a specific color combination. The result is a brilliant patchwork of colors, shapes and materials. Her pieces feature either chunky beads (above) or gemstone chips (right).



Barlow’s home-based jewelry business has a new home: a room in the house she and her husband are renovating at French Camp. Pins in the map on the wall mark more than 30 states to which Barlow has shipped jewelry. Barlow and Varner string beads, engrave custom items and ship orders on a flexible schedule designed to allow plenty of family time.