



Unforgettable invitations
heirloom



Heirloom: Invitations that celebrate the Story

by Priscilla Y. Huff

The idea for Kimberly Kardos-Bensing's business, **Heirloom Invitations**, actually began in France, when her husband-to-be flew her to Paris and proposed to her mid-way on their trek up the Eiffel Tower. She designed and conceptualized her wedding invitations to tell the beautiful story of her engagement, complete with photos of the famous French landmark. When Kimberly (Kim) began

getting requests from friends and family members to design announcements for them, she started her business that she says is also... "an extension of my passion for parties and entertaining."

Working out of her eighteenth century period-decorated home located in New Britain (PA) in historic Bucks County (location of Washington's Crossing and





other early American historic sites/events), Kim designs what she calls CONCEPTUAL wedding and corporate event invitations as well as those for smaller parties, showers, baby announcements, christenings, business openings and other special occasions. Her work is one-of-a-kind, custom-designed for each client and is unique in that each of the invitations or announcements, "...has a story to tell and comes from an idea," says Kim. "This allows my designs to always be personal and meaningful."

When prospective clients contact Kim, she will set up an interview to gather some insight from them and search for something special, personal and unique about their events so she can plan related designs and themes. For example, after Kim spoke with one engaged couple, she created their wedding *save-the-date* to portray the story how the groom picked two pink zinnias from a nearby garden to give to his bride on their first date.

The *save-the-date* began with this story saying, "Little did he know, the pink zinnia is a symbol for lasting affection," and highlighted it with two pink zinnias that appear through the two zeros of the year 2003. The actual wedding invite went on to feature three cards illustrated with breathtaking location shots of Winterthur Museum, imprinted with romantic poems and quotes, and a colorful vellum overlay showing a bunch of brilliant zinnias. All of these pieces peeked through two die-cut zinnia shapes, cut out of a square, white and textured envelopment.

Kim says she learned the art of developing an IDEA around a concept and not just how to DESIGN, as part of advertising brainstorming in her advertising design courses at the

University of Delaware from where she received a bachelor of science in Visual Communications. Kim started her graphic artist career as a junior art director in New York City and moved onto the senior level at several advertising agencies. Kim has received a number of awards for her advertising design work including, the Franklin Award for Excellence, several Philly Gold Awards, and recently an ADDY Award, the nations largest advertising competition, for her invitation for the opening of the restaurant BLUE in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

While still working full-time as an art director at an ad agency in Bethlehem, a friend encouraged Kim to create a web site for her business. "I have found that my web site and word-of-mouth referrals have been the best methods of marketing my business," she says. Kim also receives business leads from a local wedding planner and a historical society

that holds wedding and receptions at the grounds of several local museums. She adds, "I have a great web design firm that keeps my online site (www.heirloomoccasions.com) portfolio up-to-date and gorgeous. It is important in my type of business to stay very fresh and interesting."

When her daughter, Kate, was born, Kim was able to transition her advertising career into part-time work while continuing to

grow her business. Two years later, her son, Blake was born and now, just prior to the birth of her third child due this month, Kim has left her advertising directorship to pursue Heirloom full-time from home. She says with a smile, "I consider it my second full-time job!"





Heirloom-occasions.com

How does this young mother of two, soon-to-be-three, handle everything? She recently set up a studio in a quaint cottage on her property. "It allows me to have a serene and beautiful work environment," says Kim, "but it also keeps me at home with my children." Kim also hires sitters and mommy's helpers so that she can get her creative time. "I learned this the hard way," says Kim with a laugh. "Two hundred printed wedding invitations, ivory-calligraphed envelopes and two-year olds do not mix. If you can create your own space, that is very important."

Kim kept start-up costs low by simply using the computer she already had at home for freelance work and put all the profits she made back into Heirloom. Using antique photos of her family to create her identity pieces (i.e. business card, letterhead, invoices), also allowed Kim to create a memorable Heirloom image. "Start very small, and build on your profits," advises Kim. "Do not run right out and invest tons of money that you do not have. This is advice I received from my husband and it has paid-off!"

Like all entrepreneurs, Kim has made mistakes and overcome obstacles as her business has grown. She rented space at several bridal shows, which seemed logical to her, but discovered that these brides tended to browse without buying. Kim says, "I soon realized that I was not targeting my niche market who is a more-focused individual who knows what she/he wants." Kim says, "I have also discovered that if you offer free estimating on each and every job, you will be doing that for the rest of your life." She continues, "Now I offer an estimate for a nominal fee, and credit that toward the job if they order an invitation. This way I weed out the people who are simply interested in cost comparison."

"Even though my passion is exquisite design and I have fine art sensibilities, my background in advertising taught me that all design should be built on a concept or idea," says Kim. "Design for the sake of design can be shallow and superficial. I have found my niche market to be brides and clients who are much more concerned about telling an 'interesting story,' and creating a beautiful artistic piece."

Reading and hearing about other entrepreneurs stories like those featured in one of Kim's favorite magazines, *Victoria*, has helped encourage and motivate her in her business. Kim also recently attended a U. S. Small Business

Administration (SBA) conference in Philadelphia where one of the speakers was Rebecca Matthias, mother of three and COO (Chief Operating Officer) of Mothers Work, Inc., a nationwide chain of upscale maternity clothes. "I admire the way Matthias overcame much criticism when she conceptualized her corporate maternity wear and pursued her dream in spite of what banks and other people were telling her."

Kim also formed a networking group for small businesses at home who meet monthly to hear speakers, attend seminars or to brainstorm ideas. She says, "This is very important to us because operating out of our homes and having small children, does not give us the creative stimulation we sometimes need to run a small business, to be successful and to have fun doing it."

Kim concludes, "I have so many friends who dream of doing something with their talents. All of them are struggling with the baby/potential business challenge. If you are passionate, there is always a way to do what you love, while still being there for all of your children's day-to-day activities, doctor appointments and all the little surprises that come up."

© 2003 Priscilla Y. Huff, is a freelance business writer and author of *101 Best Home-Based Businesses for Women*, 3rd.ed, a Literary Book Club selection; and *The Self-Employed Woman's Guide to Launching a Home-Based Business*

