

Finding balance

Designer Mary Olk taps success as parent, entrepreneur

BY MIKE SCOTT

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Mary Olk wasn't a typical entrepreneur when she opened her custom drapery design and interior design business.

Sure, she dealt with the usual ups-and-downs of a startup business. And, yes, she aggressively networked with the home-building community to construct long-term relationships.

But throw into the mix that Olk, as she started Designer Interiors in 1973, was a single mother of a 3-year-old daughter.

Based in Troy, Olk slowly grew her business as a somewhat reluctant entrepreneur. Olk lived virtually paycheck-to-paycheck for two decades, she said, intent on spending time with her daughter, Maggie, often at the expense of furthering her business.

But with a few key breaks after her daughter left for Michigan State University, Olk has proven

adept in the parenting realm, proficient on the job and successful in the business world.

"I'm not sure that I would recommend the path I took to everyone," she says, "but it certainly couldn't have turned out any better for me."

Olk's success, however, was no accident. She saw opportunities as she networked with homebuilders through professional memberships and attendance at national trade shows.

"You have to be very proactive in building that base of network contacts," Olk says. "Not only did I network with them, but I developed relationships with other contractors who could refer me to builders, such as carpenters and plumbers."

Olk's big break came when builder Dominic Mocerri chose her for interior design work at a large condominium project at 26 Mile and Van Dyke roads in Macomb County. He soon hired Olk to design several developments in Rochester, near the intersection of Adams and Silver



SUZANNE YURENKA

It took time but Mary Olk's interior design business caught hold.

Bell roads – a stretch now known as the "Million-Dollar Mile" for its high-end homes.

Olk now operates warehouses in Clawson and Orion Township, and her interior design works and awards are piling up. Designer Interiors revenue tops \$2 million

many years, with a client list including Mocerri Cos. and Farmington Hills-based Cohen Homes.

The firm most recently completed interior merchandising and design services for three condo-

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minium models and sales/selection center at Cohen Homes's Heron Hills community in Commerce Township.

"She does a remarkable job of conveying the level of style, conveniences and comfort for each home we build," said Frank Mocerri. "That's a tremendous value-added feature."

Olk has adjusted the way she does business during the current downturn in the housing industry. She has taken a more "consulta-

tive" approach, making small updates to older accessories and recommending paint, which is less expensive, instead of wallpaper.

"To succeed in this business, you have to be in the field at the home site and walk the building to ensure that you have covered everything you need," Olk says.

She recommends that aspiring business owners interact with others to build a network base: "You never know when or from whom you will get business."

A lot of that works comes as a result of satisfied clients spreading the word as Olk's design help

to shift single-family home and condo shoppers into buyers.

"You have to let your work speak for itself," she says, "and in my case I need to make the builders feel confident that my work will help them sell homes."

In the end, however, what matters most is her daughter, she says.

"I have a great relationship with my very bright daughter to this day," Olk says, "and when you think about it, that is all that really matters."

■ Mike Scott is a freelance writer.