



USING HER GIFTS TO BUILD A LIFE AND A BUSINESS; CAROLINE BREWER, Staff Writer
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Biographical: SHIRLEY GEORGE FRAZIER

To say that life is sweet for Shirley George Frazier, a former secretary turned head honcho of a gift basket consulting company, is to say a mouthful.

After 13 years of being bossed around by the likes of architects, accountants, Wall Streeters, and oil company managers, Frazier became her own boss. She founded Sweet Survival, loaded up her home with gourmet cookies, teas, and crackers, and mmm, mmm, mmm, how sweet it is.

"I did it because it was just that yearning to have something of my own, and to succeed on my own terms, at my own pace," explains Frazier, author of the just-released second edition of her book "How to Start a Home-Based Gift Basket Business."

"The risk was outweighed by what I thought I could achieve."

What this Brooklyn-born, Paterson-reared entrepreneur has done in the 10 years since she quit her eighth, and final, "dead-end-misery" job is nothing short of mouthwatering. To date, she has made 30 television appearances, been a featured speaker dozens of times around the country, authored two books, two newsletters, countless magazine articles, taught at local schools and colleges, run her own Web site, and now draws a yearly income close to six figures.

On a recent evening at her Paterson home, Frazier, who soon turns 43, demonstrated the quick and creative skills that have won her fans from coast to coast. After dragging a crate full of about 50 pounds of goodies next to her living room table, she placed on top of it a small red sleigh, adorned with glittering bows and mock ivy. She then began methodically to pile up the treats.

Fancy nuts with names that would make an investment banker drool -- Mutual Funs, Preferred Stock, CASHews -- suddenly appear. Spicy, cheese-flavored corn kernels, for people who want a little more pop in their corn, arrive in a can of Pop Nuts.

There's Christmas-colored pasta, jalapeno-peach jam, De-Stress Tea, Conversational Coasters featuring questions such as "What Show Began with the Pilot, `The Homecoming?'" and white chocolate-cherry bark.

She counts an impressive crew among her customers -- Donna Hanover, New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani's estranged wife; the governor of the Virgin Islands, and vocalist Bobby Caldwell.

And to think, Frazier's decade-long bask in the sweetness of running her own company was rooted in a more than decade-long bout of frustration.

Shortly after graduating No. 1 in her class at the Sawyer Business School in Clifton, the wife and mother of a now 21-year-old daughter realized she had a problem. No job satisfied.

Every 18 months on average, she dumped an unfulfilling secretarial position. It went on for 13 years. Two accounting firms in Newark. An architectural firm in Manhattan. A Fortune 500 brokerage house in the World Trade Center. A youth organization. An oil company. A nut importer.

Not a one of them made her heart swell with pride. Not a one made her spring from bed in excited anticipation of each new day. In 1985, while working at the brokerage house, Frazier plotted escape. All she knew was that it had to be sweet. It had to be pioneering. It had to be her own.

Owning your own business was in the George family blood, after all. At the turn of the century, Frazier's great-grandmother grew strawberries for a living on her Virginia farm. In the 1940s, her maternal great-aunt ran a fudge and chocolate shop out of her home. Frazier's mother was a delivery girl.

Pioneers had their place in the family, too. Frazier's dad was a chemist at a time when black chemists were few.

Frazier was determined to keep pace with her family's traditions, and then some. But true to the entrepreneurial tradition, her first idea, to operate a word-processing service, was a flop. Her second idea -- to own a lingerie shop -- never made it off the drawing board.

A bad day at the office for her husband's co-worker turned out to be Frazier's saving grace. John Frazier came home with a tiny bottle of liqueur and a shot glass. He found some small rocks and glued them to the bottom of the glass. He wrapped the whole thing in cellophane, topped it with a bow, and presented it to the young woman the next morning.

"Everyone in the office was raving about it, and (the young woman) was so thrilled," Shirley Frazier recalled.

And just as the day brightened for her husband's co-worker, it did the same for Frazier's entrepreneurial prospects.

The proverbial light bulb went off in her head, and in 1989, she decided to join the now \$1.5 billion gift basket industry. Intent from the beginning to set herself apart in whatever business she pursued, she

never put a product in a basket. She shopped locally at first, but soon she found catalogs that catered to her desire to fill her containers with usual delights. Frazier sought out unusual containers that could be used after the goodies were all gone. She snapped up hatboxes, and things like cups in the shape of a pregnant woman, which Hanover bought for an expectant friend.

She filled plastic globes with sweet treats, signifying "a world of thanks." A popular item was the rainy day basket, which included a jigsaw puzzle and game book, with a tiny upturned umbrella inside a Shaker box, for people who might be convalescing.

To let the world in on the budding gift enterprise, Frazier's mother purchased a two-week ad for \$5,000 on the soft jazz radio station, CD 101.9. Frazier's phone, "broke down," with orders, she said. That's when the wife of the governor of the Virgin Islands called, looking for a gift for the governor's birthday. The radio station's staff ordered gift baskets, and so did some of their featured artists, like crooner Bobby Caldwell.

Months later, Frazier called a Food Network producer about advertising her products on one of the network's shows. Three months later, with one day's notice, she was invited to whip up baskets for New Year's Day and made her television debut. Hanover, a co-host on one of the Food Network programs, wasn't working that day, but she became a repeat customer.

Of course, not every moment of being the boss has been ice cream smooth for Frazier. In the beginning, she spent long hours in a resource center of Essex County Community College, where she earned an associate degree in business management in 1990 -- finding out everything she could about how to run a business. She wasted time and money on mass mailings to companies that never ordered a product. She thought just about anybody was a potential customer.

Frazier's stumbles never stopped her. They, indeed, were the inspiration for "How to Start a Home-based Gift Basket Business" -- the first book of its kind in the industry -- which came out for Christmas 1997. It has sold 35,000 copies. An updated version with more information on using the World Wide Web to market products arrived in stores this month.

Frazier keeps busy these days helping stores package products they already have, speaking at seminars, and sometimes teaching courses on starting a home-based gift basket business. The next big thing in her entrepreneurial life is uncertain, but she relishes the decision she made years back to go it alone.

"You can stay stuck in something, or you can take a chance on you," Frazier says. "Every day there can be a new phone call, or a new event that just opens up another door."

Illustrations/Photos: COLOR PHOTO - ED HILL / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - After years of unsatisfying jobs, Shirley Frazier took a chance and became an entrepreneur.

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