

“The Traveling Apprentice” Works for EmbroidMe

Embroidery, the art of decorating fabric or other materials by stitching designs using thread or yarn and a needle has been around since man began to decorate clothes. Today, because of computerization and the invention of the shuttle needle, an embellished item that might have taken weeks or months to complete by hand can now be mass produced in a matter of moments by specialty shops such EmbroidMe in Dunkirk, owned by Bonita Thomas.

I arrived for my Traveling Apprentice assignment fully expecting embroidery occurring at the shop but it quickly became apparent that Bonita and her staff handled a variety of projects, from-design-to-fulfillment, using a variety of embellishment techniques in addition to embroidery such screen printing on promotional products, personalized gifts, and signs.

Since each staff person was already busy at a particular technique that left me with the important task of folding T-shirts. You laugh, but folding T-shirts at an embroidery shop consumes considerable staff time. Every T-shirt is folded at least twice: It's sorted by size and folded for storage when it arrives from the distributor jumbled in a box of assorted sizes and it's folded again after it's been embellished.

My assignment: Fold two hundred newly arrived shirts. To facilitate my assignment I was given a flat plastic device with hinged side flaps and bottom. By laying shirts flat on the contraption, and flipping and flopping the sides and bottom of the device I ended with a shirt folded precisely 9" wide by 11 1/2" long.

Flip. Flip. Flip. Flop.

As you might imagine, repeated flipping and flopping is pretty mindless work so I distracted myself by observing what was going on around me: the person running a press machine that cranked out screen printed shirts; the staff person setting up seven embroidery machines with exactly the same threads before positioning seven identical baseball caps on the embroidery hoops; the computer person who programmed the machines to accept a logo he'd created so they would change colored threads as needed and clatter away in synchronized rhythm, simultaneously embroidering the same logo onto each cap.

Because Bonita had expressed confidence that her staff could embellish any item a client could dream up, I also entertained

myself by listening as customers placed orders. Most orders were ho-hum- -shirts for teams, etc.- - but occasionally there were those that made eavesdropping worthwhile. Like the bar-tender who felt “female bar-tenders got better tips because males came to bars to see boobs”, so he ordered a large female breast embroidered on each side of his uniform vest.

Or the soft-spoken woman I had trouble hearing who was ordering something embroidered on a pair of men's briefs. Whoa! Now that sounded interesting! I strained to hear the rest but - - drats!- - I couldn't make it out.

I realized my imagination was distracting me, that I was flopping where I needed to be flipping, and that I needed to concentrate on the task at hand.

Flip. Flip. Flip. Flop

Only 105 more shirts to go.

Flip. Flip. Flip. . .



The Traveling Apprentice is a monthly column written by Carolyn McHugh, President/CEO of the Calvert County Chamber of Commerce. Each month Carolyn spends a day working for a Chamber member, then writes a column for a local newspaper about the experience. The article is later inserted into Chamber's newsletter and posted on the Chamber's web-site in order to give the maximum exposure to the Chamber member. Her commitment to Chamber members and to the readers is that she's there for Chamber members and that whatever they do in their daily job, she'll do, too.