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House of Cards Shows No Signs of Tumbling

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Step inside an American Greetings retailer, such as Carlton Cards, and you'll come face to face with a prominent display of the Kathy Davis collection, including cards, gift bags and mugs bearing Davis' signature artwork and calligraphy.

Davis is excited about her new relationship with American Greetings Corp., which is among the world's largest manufacturers and retailers of greeting cards, gift wrap, party goods, stationery and giftware. "They're really launching my brand," she says, noting that a nearby Carlton Cards store has "a huge poster in their window" with her photo on it.

Make no mistake. Davis is no overnight success. She's spent nearly two decades working her way to this milestone.

Her rise to the top began when the former art teacher-turned-stay-at-home mom became a divorcee who needed to earn a living. She had a master's degree in art, a background in teaching, and was doing some freelance calligraphy primarily as a hobby.

A friend suggested she get serious about the greeting cards she'd been doing for family and friends, and arranged for Davis to attend an industry trade show with her.

Attending the show intimidated Davis—but it also inspired her. She started creating cards and submitting them, one at a time, to greeting card companies. When one company submitted an order for six cards, she quit her two other jobs—doing graphic design for a printing company and teaching evening adult school—and committed herself to her new life. It was June 8, 1990, known forever more to Davis as her "personal independence day."

The business slowly built, as more companies accepted her work. One was Recycled Paper Greetings, which eventually opted for an exclusive contract with Davis. "I was then on a royalty basis and able to build a meaningful line with them. We grew together," she says, and they stayed together for 15 years.

She expanded by licensing products such as mugs and gift bags. But those products needed reformatting—a cluster of poppies, for example, had to wrap around a mug. Unable to meet the demand, she started hiring help. And The Studio at Kathy Davis was born. "It was great to have this creative staff," she says. "Not only could they work on reformatting my things, but they also had something to offer on their own."

So she approached Recycled Paper about putting together another diverse offering that was different from what she was doing. The card company was skeptical, she recalls, but agreed to give it a try. "It worked extremely well," Davis says. What's more, "It also met that teaching need that I still had, and that desire to nurture other talent."

Today, Kathy Davis Studios comprises four brands: Kathy Davis; The Studio at Kathy Davis; Portfolio, a treasure chest of best sellers that get reinvented in various ways; and Fred & Lorraine, a separate brand focused on humor. "We have 15 people in-house, and it's growing," Davis says.

Meanwhile, Recycled Greetings was sold to an investor, and American Greetings came knocking at Davis' door. The deal signed in April 2008 is proving to be a perfect fit for both parties. This month, American Greetings has introduced a Mother's Day collection that includes giftware and keepsakes, such as teapots, photo frames, wall hangings and pillows.

Davis grew during her 15 years with Recycled Paper Greetings, but it was harder for her to be a brand. "They really sold cards, and that was their focus," she says. American Greetings, on the other hand, was looking for a brand with personality and a message—exactly what Davis needed.

"She really brings a full story with her designing. It was just something we really thought balanced well with our product," says Mary Beth Sibert, director of the Kathy Davis brand at American Greetings. "Her messaging is so authentic. It really spoke to us, so that we want to be able to share her messaging with our customers."

Davis says it took her awhile to catch on to the brand possibilities of her products. "People kept talking about this brand I had," which Davis says launched her into a search for a way to characterize her brand. At the end of one in a series of brainstorming sessions, a frustrated Davis burst out, "All I want to do is scatter joy." The phrase, part of a quotation originally penned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, embodies what Davis considers her brand promise. "That's really what I do," she says. "I like to find joy in the moment and share it with others."

That brand promise has led to a book called Scatter Joy. <http://www.kathydavis.com/ScatterJoyBook/buy.html> "It's about living, giving and creating a life you love," Davis says. "Which is really what I went through: finding a path that didn't feel like work and creating this life that was enjoyable to me but that I could give back through." The book, in turn, has spawned an interactive, social networking Scatter Joy website <http://www.scatterjoy.com/> where people can share their joy in the form of photos, stories or quotes.

Like starting a card company or hiring employees and managing them, the book took Davis out of her comfort zone. "I write greeting card copy. I don't write 30,000-word books. But I'm glad I did it because now I have an introduction to the brand and a real platform for reaching more people in a time where, obviously, everyone's looking for joy."

Davis admits to being amazed at how far she's come. Retail sales last year topped \$50 million, and Davis expects to grow this year, for several reasons: her new relationship with a large company, her new book and the fact that cards typically do well in a recession. "Even if you can't afford to buy a gift, most people will buy a card," she says.

Nevertheless, Davis isn't finished reaching for the stars. After all, her "scatter joy" message incorporates three elements: joy through art, joy through living and joy through giving. To create joy through living, her next step is lifestyle products for the home, beginning with a line of fabrics she's in the process of licensing.

Her most recent example of joy through giving is her efforts on behalf of the Sunshine Foundation, which fulfills the dreams of sick, physically challenged and abused children. Davis not only participated in the organization's sixth annual Walk of Dreams, but she also created a card for the organization and donated the profits received from that card.

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Her biggest dream of all would blend all three parts of her scatter joy credo: She wants to create a series of Scatter Joy Centers for the Arts. "I'd love to create that platform of joy through art and living and giving," she says. "The teaching and the entrepreneurship coming together--that would feel really nice."

SIDEBAR

Advice from the Artist

Kathy Davis' advice for enterprising personality:

1. Believe in yourself. 2. Find the work that you love so it doesn't feel so much like work 3. Accept that there is no secret to success. It's really about working hard, taking rejection, but still keep working. If it doesn't work on place, it certainly could work another. 4. Be open to change; take risks 5. Treat people with respect. "That goes a real long way. Whether it's a client, an employee or yourself, it's really critical."

Finally, a piece of advice she received from a fellow entrepreneur:

6. Draw your boundaries. "Everybody's going to want a piece of you. Make sure you maintain doing the things you love."

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