

Shh! (Tell your friends)

City woman finds her calling with adult novelty parties

By Amy Guerrero
For The CALL

Jennifer Jolicoeur would seem to have it all at age 34: a devoted husband, two young children and her own business, Athena's Home Novelties, which earned \$6 million in revenues last year.

With no end in sight to the business' growth, Jolicoeur projects a \$2 million revenue increase in 2005 and predicts that in five years "we'll be a household name and I'll be the Mary Kay of adult toys."

Jolicoeur could be called the Sex Goddess of Woonsocket. Her business, which relies on in-home parties at which presenters show off erotic toys and products as well as an extensive array of aromatherapy, bathing and massage lotions, soaps and oils, has more than 300 distributors operating in 23 states.

Distributors are called "Goddesses" and Jolicoeur's voice mail message at the company's headquarters at 640 Winter St. lets you know you have reached Athena's "Mother Goddess."

Home parties for the company are held 300 nights a year, with presenters averaging sales of \$1,00 each. In addition, Athena's sells its wares over the Internet at www.athenashn.com.

Jolicoeur said she got involved in the business 13 years ago when she took a job as a presenter for an earlier version of the business that she eventually bought out. She said she was struck by the interest in the business' products, which cater to women's sexual needs by offering them a safe, confidential environment.

At the same time, she said, she felt that she had arrived at the exact right time, place and opportunity.

During her high school year, she said, friends had actively sought her out for advice on highly personal matters.

When a friend told her, "You could do that," in regard to running her own parties, she agreed. Despite the disapproval of family members, Jolicoeur said, she refused to be dissuaded.

"Nothing was going to derail me," she said. "I knew this was going to take me places I wanted to go."

Jolicoeur excelled at presenting parties and worked at that for about seven years before starting her own business.

"I still do parties two or three times a month because it's what I really love," she said.

Guests attending home parties that can last up to five hours place their orders privately with the presenter.

At a recent party in the Woonsocket area, Abra, 36, invited 10 friends over for the evening while her husband was out with her children. Abra said she decided to host her own party because she had attended on e the year before and found it enjoyable and interesting.

“It’s kind of human nature to want to add a little spice to your life,” she said, “and this is a social event that meets the needs of women who may not want to go out and try to find sex toys themselves.”

Jolicouer said the confidentiality of patrons is stressed.

“We make sex toys and sexuality as non-threatening as possible for the women who attend by presenting the items in the safety and comfort of the home,” Jolicouer said. “We want women to feel comfortable and not feel judged by other women.”

To start lining up parties, Jolicouer said, she placed a classified ad in a local publication for readers “curious about adult toys but don’t know who to ask.” The ad included her telephone number.

“It spread like wildfire,” she said,

Attendees at each of those early parties offered to host parties at their own homes. Business has boomed ever since.

A 1989 graduate of the Woonsocket Area Vocational Technical High School, Jolicouer, whose maiden name is Lambert, did not attend college. Instead, in her senior year, she used some impressive typing speed – she won awards for typing up to 85 words per minute – to land a job at CVS headquarters in the city.

She started as an assistant editor for the company’s newsletter and then moved to the media department making video training films and working with CVS’ executive team, including Harvey Rosenthal, former president and chief executive officer, current president Tom Ryan, and David Johnson, the company’s head of sales and marketing.

“I traveled all over the country and learned how to be dynamic and how to motivate people,” Jolicouer said. “The eight years I spent there was my college.”

Soon after graduating, she married her high school sweetheart, Curtis Jolicouer, a gourmet chef who now stays at home at the couple’s North Smithfield home with their two young children.

Today, the converted warehouse that is Athena’s Home Novelties headquarters employs more than 30 people, including a number of relatives and friends. The business has moved to the spacious warehouse about six months ago.