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**Athena's opens for retail sales**



Jennifer Jolicoeur, owner of Athena's Home Novelties, shows off some hot stocking stuffers at the company's warehouse at 640 Winter St. The location is now open for retail sales. (Valley Breeze & Observer Photo By SANDY PHANEUF)

By **SANDY PHANEUF**, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

WOONSOCKET - When Jennifer Jolicoeur first opened Athena's Home Novelties, she would quietly ship and receive UPS boxes from an apartment on Main Street. The building was owned by a Catholic organization and when they learned the nature of her work - sales of "adult toys" - they nearly evicted her.

"I asked them, 'Are you married?' and they said, 'Yes,'" she told The Breeze. "I said, 'I want to help marriages last and keep couples happy and together.' That's what I do." The group relented and Jolicoeur continued to grow her enterprise.

Now, the 41-year-old Woonsocket native, known affectionately by her salespeople as "mother goddess," runs the most successful adult novelty home party company in New England. With a network of 1,400 salespeople in 39 states, the city-based company sees annual sales in the millions. At a warehouse on Winter Street, where Athena's has been headquartered for the past seven years, 18 full-time and 10 part-time employees pick and sort the products and collaborate new ways to move the company forward.

This month, Jolicoeur announced that the warehouse is open for retail sales as well. Athena's entire catalog of products, from bathing and aromatherapy treats, to more racy items intended for couples, has been made available to guests to the store.

The move is just another small expansion for the successful city business, now celebrating its 15th year.

The secret to Athena's rise, and economic stability even through a recession, may lie in the company's image. Jolicoeur's business has little in common with the dimly-lit shops and clubs found in the seedier neighborhoods of Providence and Worcester. Only the company emblem, a winking female countenance modeled after a statue of the Greek goddess herself, adorns the various bottles and potions found on Athena's shelves. Photos of scantily clad and scandalously thin women are pleasantly absent from the Athena's lineup.

Instead, Jolicoeur has made the business of adult novelties about empowerment, single-handedly changing the image of the industry by making her products, which she believes have the power to revolutionize an individual's self-image and create healthier relationships, accessible to the masses. She actively fights the notion that sex is a shameful topic, not to be discussed.

"Our home parties allow people to come together and talk about a very sensitive subject that needs to be discussed," she said.

**This Week's Ads**

- 77 Restaurant
- USA Karate
- Cumberland Wine & Spirits
- Suite 600
- New England Self Storage

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With Athena's, Jolicoeur aims to take the embarrassment out of sexuality and at home parties across the country women gather to share a glass of wine and maybe a few giggles with friends and family over her products. With Athena's, everyone's invited to take part in the fun.

"You tend to believe that sex and pleasure is associated with youth, that it's youth-based, but there are a lot of people who are older who need this information, who want to feel romance and passion, and they deserve it," Jolicoeur said.

At the headquarters, women in their 60s and 70s who want to learn about their own anatomy often stop in.

"They come in and ask us questions about their bodies," she said. Jolicoeur and her staff are happy to oblige.

All of her salespeople, or female "goddesses" and male "adoni," are trained not just about Athena's products, but human anatomy.

"One of the great features about Athena's is that we're sex educators," said Jolicoeur. "That's the position that we take. We teach people about one of the most sensitive subjects that, let's face it, not everyone feels comfortable talking about."

Before hosting a party, her salespeople must undergo a mandatory two full days of training, including a day dedicated to the human body. Goddesses travel from all over the country to attend three company meetings a year at the Stadium Theatre. Nine times a year she hosts Better Business workshops, and one Monday night a month, she holds tele-training sessions.

"I'd be crazy not to train my people because they're a reflection of my business," Jolicoeur said.

The 12,000-square-foot space at 640 Winter St. is an extension of that unique, warm and open approach to sex. Lilac and green walls are decked out with purple garland and silver balls for the holidays. A discreet curtained area in the back has been converted to a private ordering room.

"We don't have the conversation at the front desk," said Jolicoeur. "One of the best parts about coming here is we will offer a private shopping experience."

Jolicoeur intends for home parties to still make up the bulk of her business, but hopes people will use the warehouse to fill their last-minute requests. For years, she said, she's served brides seeking something special for their honeymoon and men looking for last-minutes gifts the night before Valentine's Day or an anniversary.

Although 2008 was Jolicoeur's biggest year to date with more than \$10 million in sales, her business, and the entire adult novelty industry, has seen a large uptick in sales thanks to the 2012 best-selling novel "50 Shades of Grey."

"That book boosted our business beyond anything I could have imagined, and we are now back in a major, major upswing," she said.

For Jolicoeur, that success is the realization of a long-time dream and an opportunity to give back to her hometown.

"I really love this city," Jolicoeur said. "I'm a Woonsocket girl and I like to keep as much of my money in the city as possible."

The "mother goddess" said she only dines at local restaurants. Her salespeople stay at the Holiday Inn Express when they visit and holiday parties are held at Giro's. The company is sponsoring two families through the "Adopt-A-Family" program this Christmas and is currently preparing for Boudoir Bingo, its annual fund-raiser for the city's Milk Fund. The popular event typically draws in between 75 to 100 people of all ages with all proceeds to go toward the cause. This year, bingo will be held at the Winter Street headquarters on Friday, Nov. 30, with doors opening at 7 p.m., and will include raffles and more than \$1,000 in prizes.

"I have a very successful business and we must give back to the community," Jolicoeur explained.

The company's largest project by far, however, is the Athena's Cup, a national campaign aimed at raising breast cancer awareness. The fund-raiser, which asks women to donate \$5 toward breast cancer research along with a gently-used bra, was started in 2009 with the hope of beating the Guinness Book World Record for a bra chain of 169,000. To date, they've collected 93,000 bras, and boxes and trash bags full of donations still wait to be counted. Often, the donations come from cancer survivors or the families of those whose lives were cut short by breast cancer.

"The chain to me represents the connection," said Jolicoeur. "Ninety-three thousand women have sent me their bras because they would like to see breast cancer eradicated." Her dream, she said, is to string the bras together at Autumnfest, putting both Woonsocket and the fall celebration in world record

## Breeze Dining Guide

### Upcoming events

#### Let Your Yoga Dance

Tuesday, December 18  
9:15 am - 10:15 am  
North Providence Pool and Fitness Center, 1810  
Mineral Spring Ave., North Providence

#### Tai Chi

Tuesday, December 18  
9:15 am  
Salvatore Mancini Resource & Activity Center, 2  
Atlantic Blvd., North Providence

#### Quilting

Tuesday, December 18  
9:30 am  
Salvatore Mancini Resource & Activity Center, 2  
Atlantic Blvd., North Providence

[more events](#)

Lincoln, RI  
36°



Wind: NNE at 12 mph  
Dewpoint: 34  
Humidity: 93%  
Visibility: 0 miles

Forecast



books.

Jolicoeur acknowledges that she still has a long way to go to beat that record, but points out that it's not the first time she's taken on a challenge.

"At first I felt like the city didn't want me here. Like they didn't appreciate what I was doing and I was kind of an outcast," she said.

It's a hurdle that Jolicoeur was ultimately able to overcome.