

She Got Rich Doing What?

These five women all own companies that bring in major money—and there's not a banker in the bunch. Let them show you how to turn an oddball business idea into a cash machine

By Virginia Sole-Smith

When she retired after 20 years in the army, **Adrienne van Dooren**, now 48, immediately started working on her personal reinvention. Living off her pension of \$30,000 a year, she took advantage of an educational program for vets and signed up for art classes. Her goal wasn't to get a painting into a museum (though that would have been nice) but to become a faux finisher, using trompe l'oeil techniques to create the illusion of three-dimensional, textured surfaces.

This is a very specific kind of passion, and van Dooren fell into it by accident. In her army career, she had been reposted so many times to nondescript rental houses that she had started fixing them up herself, which made her realize she had a talent for decorative painting. In 2001, van Dooren retired, set up shop in her home (which was then in Alexandria, Virginia) and accepted a commission from a friend who wanted the tile in her powder room to look like marble. In those early days, van Dooren charged \$800 for three days of work, \$200 of which she had to spend on supplies. The first two years, she lost money; the third, she grossed \$45,000. "I kept hearing that you couldn't make any real money as a faux finisher," she says. "I thought, that's fine; I'll work for meaning, not money."

In 2005, van Dooren partnered with the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity to launch The House That Faux Built Project, to raise money for victims of Hurricane Katrina (fauxhouse.com). She recruited more

than 100 other artists for the project and came up with the idea of putting together a coffee table book, *The House That Faux Built*, to showcase their work. After it was published, in 2007, "I was suddenly being invited to speak at national painting conventions, and I was asked to appear on a syndicated TV show," van Dooren says. "I saw that the book had given me credibility, and I could really market myself as an expert in my field."

With this new platform, van Dooren's income climbed steadily, and this year, her seventh in the business, she expects to earn more than \$1 million. Her minimum on-site project fee is \$200,000; an individual painting on canvas or wood goes for \$10,000 to \$125,000. She also serves as the national marketing director for MyGreenCottage, an eco-friendly home builder, and is a regular on the lecture circuit. "I love turning an ugly house into something beautiful, and I probably would do it for free," she says. "But I realized it's OK to be rich. It gives you the freedom to do so much more to help other people."

Although women now own 41 percent of all privately held firms, van Dooren is part of a select group: the three percent of women business owners who have annual revenues of \$1 million or more. What's holding back the other 97 percent? Thinking small. "Women tend to launch businesses for personal reasons," says Gwen Martin of the Center for Women's Business Research. "They're finding a solution to a problem they've encountered, or they're creating a