

# The mother of (re)invention

*Customer service and the ability to adjust have served Pam Hylton Coffield well*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK WINEKA

**B**ack in 1975 when Pam Hylton Coffield started her downtown business, sales representative Sam Patton told her not to expect making any money in the first three years.

And he was right. As a 20-year-old business owner, Coffield couldn't pay herself or her mom, Margaret, a salary at first. She took a part-time job elsewhere to help make ends meet, while also pursuing her business degree from Catawba College.

She relied on Margaret when she couldn't man the store herself.

But Coffield went on to prove her business savvy many times over, adapting her business model along the way. Today, she owns the

45-year-old *Stitchin' Post Gifts* at 104 S. Main St. and recently was named a 2020 Main Street Champion.

Coffield also served on Salisbury City Council from 1986 to 1993, years during which she had perfect attendance at council meetings. Though Karen Young was the first woman City Council member as an appointee, Coffield made local history as the first woman elected to the council.

She also has served on the boards of the Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Salisbury Inc., Tourism and Convention and Faithful Friends. She received a Certificate of Merit from the city in 1983, and the Community Appearance Commission recognized her in 1990 for

her contribution to downtown revitalization.

A native of Augusta, Georgia, Coffield has lived in Salisbury since 1960. She graduated from both West Rowan High and Catawba College. She and her husband, Hodge, live in Salisbury, and Pam is the daughter of Wallas Hylton and the late Margaret.

Coffield's store cats — first Knitwit, and now Sasha — became ambassadors for *Stitchin' Post Gifts* and integral to her business advertising and fundraising for the Humane Society and Faithful Friends.

Salisbury the Magazine recently caught up with this Rowan Original for a quick Q&A during the time many businesses such as Coffield's were dealing with COVID-19 restrictions:



**Q.** *Stitchin' Post Gifts has been a downtown anchor for decades now, one of the longest surviving businesses. Can you briefly summarize why you think it has been a success?*

My dad says it's about personality and attitude, and I believe that. My mom and I started the business, and she was so sweet, kind and accommodating to customers. Back in the needlework days, some customers would buy kits from our bigger competitors, then bring them to us so we could teach a certain stitch. Even though they had bought the kits elsewhere, you invited them in, sat them down and helped them get unstuck — and then they traded with you for the rest of their lives. She (Margaret Hylton) was a master at that. I give her a ton of credit.

I also used to hang out with Al Hoffman, Paul Bernhardt, Clarence Mayfield and R.O. Everett. They were such good businessmen. I really learned a lot from all of them. About inventory, Clarence used to say,

"You can't sell from any empty apple cart." R.O. lived by the rule you had to return all business calls by dusk of the same day.

Buying the (circa 1860) building in 1982 was a great move and, of course, you work hard, keep consistent hours and take care of your employees and customers.

**Has the COVID-19 crisis been the biggest challenge your business has ever faced, and what kinds of emotions and frustrations did you have to deal with as a business owner?**

By far the biggest challenge. You spend your whole life driving people to your door and then suddenly overnight you try to keep them away. We're known for reinventing ourselves and our product offering over the years but always took baby steps as we had the time to test. Here we go again reinventing ourselves, but this time there's no transition time. It was overwhelming and still is. But we adjusted by going to curbside pickup, more mail orders and a bigger push on social media.

***When we return to a new normal, so to speak, will your store be the same, or will you be doing anything differently?***

We will follow all the state guidelines for safety, sanitization and more. It was a challenge to make a sneeze guard look cute in a store like ours, but we did it and our customers love it.

***In hindsight, how do you think the state's response to COVID-19, as it related to businesses such as yours, could have been better?***

They did the best they could with what they knew at the time. I think Gov. Cooper has been sensitive, thoughtful and strategic with his guidelines. Nobody knew the answers ... not the banks, not the accountants. We all were guessing and wondering, and all the information was so vague. But that's because nobody knew anything about what was happening.

***During the shutdown, what kinds of things did you find yourself doing at home to pass the days of isolation? It had to have been an unusual time for you.***

I didn't stay at home. It was shocking to walk into a dark store on that Tuesday morning after closing. I was at the store packing and mailing out hand sanitizer the first week of shutdown. We pushed our social media hard and generated sales for mailing and curbside pickup. We discovered we needed to jump into the world of e-commerce and started doing Live Facebook sales. This is like starting a new business. It's a completely different business model than front-door selling. My limited staff and I were working five times harder for five times less money. So there was no rest for us during that time.

***What are some of the biggest needs or challenges facing downtown Salisbury these days, and what would be the biggest shot in the arm for it?***

Friday Nights Out, the Empire Hotel, employee parking and a parking deck.

***Looking back, what was the best decision you ever made as a business owner?***



*Pam Hylton Coffield, owner of Stitchin' Post Gifts, stands in front of a backdrop she recently used for a Live Facebook promotion, just one of the adjustments her downtown Salisbury business had to make during the quarantine.*

Locating downtown and buying the building. Look at Towne Mall, Rowan Mall, Salisbury Mall — all are gone, but the downtown is still here. The downtown is original. Stitchin' Post Gifts is original. Each business here is original. There are no cookie-cutter businesses — all are unique with their own personalities. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

***What are your passions outside of work?***

Working out, hiking, girlfriend trips, spending time with my hubby, Hodge, and our baset hound, Gretta, and, of course, caring for my dearest daddy.

***Your dad, Wallas Hylton, is a famously happy man of 100. What has he taught you about life?***

Whoa! You don't have enough time! When I was in elementary school, all the kids were getting an allowance but me. So I told my dad, and we went to Home Savings and Loan, where he deposited \$25 in my first savings account, in lieu of an allowance. I still have the little blue book. "You're going to see how this grows," he said. That was just a wonderful financial lesson in investment. He always said, "Make as much money as you can and save as much money as you can." Dad was like his father, Alfred, who

also managed his money well, and that got passed down to us. In other aspects, my parents led by example. They were the best — loving, kind and godly. They taught all of us kids to be that way in life. And there's a lot of laughter in the Hylton family. Dad taught us how to laugh at ourselves — not everyone can do that.

***What two things might I always find in your fridge or pantry?***

We get on these food kicks. Right now, it's Brussels sprouts and leftovers from LA Murph's.

***What are two or three of your favorite books?***

The Bible, and most others are business/trade journals and educational materials.

***If you could go back 30 years, what's the best advice you might give a younger Pam Hylton Coffield?***

Watch your finances. Make as much money as you can and save as much money as you can. Invest 10% of what you earn — another pearl of wisdom from Clarence Mayfield. Don't burn any bridges in business if you can help it. Lead by example. Earn your trust with people — it's a wonderful thing, trust. 