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Conway couple set to hit QVC with product

GARRISON WELLS
ON BUSINESS

Erika Timmons is about to become a star.

The Conway resident, who has developed a cross-shaped Christmas tree with her husband, Eric, will be on QVC pitching the tree later this month.

She's already visited the network for rehearsals in New York and will be on the air July 25, which is also her birthday.



The duo - he's 35 and she is 34 - were in the Army when they met, so they are used to missions.

Their mission with the tree is to help families put the right emphasis on Christmas.

"My husband is a mechanical designer by degree. In 1997, we were living in Atlanta and were really concerned about the message we were giving to our children as to what Christmas is all about. That Christmas, we made our very first model."

The tree, which is artificial, has been sold through Christian stores for the past two years.

QVC, though, could be the big break the Timmonses have been looking for.

Question | Your husband designed the tree?

Answer | He did indeed. He designed it in 1997. He had not finished college as of yet, so everything was on graph paper. He just simply drew it out.

Q. | Eric is a minister. How has that affected your mission?

A. | He is an ordained Baptist minister and has been for the past 11 years. That helped us a lot to pursue this. There have been so many times when it would have been easier

to quit.

Q. | So now the tree is designed. What did you do next?

A. | I just started making cold calls to Christmas tree makers all over the nation. I called overseas. I called the Vatican. I found one nun who spoke English. I was pursuing the history of the Christmas tree and how people felt about it.

Q. | What did the nun say?

A. | She told me that in Vatican City, they did not decorate for Christmas, that many years ago a Pope had decided in order not to offend Catholics from all over the world, they don't decorate any more. She recommended the Catholic Church because it has conventions. That I should go to American Catholic priests and see if they would put it in their stores. It was good advice, but instead of Catholic, I went Baptist because that's my religion.

That's how we ended up in lots of Christian bookstores.

Q. | Describe your tree.

A. | It's beautiful. It comes in six sizes, from three feet to six feet, and you can special-order them up to 15 feet. One church in Birmingham has used theirs for both Easter and Christmas.

Q. | Something like this isn't easy. What have been some of your obstacles?

A. | We had opposition from other Christians who didn't want Christmas messed with. One particular instance we met with a financial adviser for Chick-fil-A. We were seeking investors for the patenting process and one of the questions one of the board members asked is "Isn't this prostituting off the cross?" My husband's response was, "We feel we are celebrating something that is special, something that is an important symbol. We always felt it was a celebration."

Q. | How much has it cost you over the years?

A. | Since 1997, we have probably put about \$25,000 into it. For us, when you are living off a soldier's salary, that's a lot. We tried everything: fliers, mailouts.

Q. | Are you breaking even now?

A. | Not yet. We won't break even probably for another two years. The only exception to that is after we have done QVC, if QVC does a large order and we get into larger vendors like Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart can make or break you, they really can.

Q. | Wal-Mart would be huge for you. How would you handle that kind of deal?

A. | I would want to start out smaller. If I just do one district, I can go to the stores. I can help them be prepared at every level. I really care about this and how it is represented.

Q. | Do you want to be able to make a living from this? Is that your goal?

A. | Our goal ultimately for this is to get the finances to do things, to fund a ministry [for my husband]. That's going to be the next thing my husband does. The second thing is to simply build a house for us, and third is our children's education. Anything after that is extra. That's always been our point

Q. | Are you nervous about going on the air?

A. | I am very excited about it. When I was in the military, I won Soldier of the Quarter several times. I'm thinking when I walk on there for that particular airing, I may feel it then, but when you feel passion in your heart, you are not as nervous.

Back at the market

Mary Naseef, who runs a business at the North Myrtle Beach Flea Market, says the market is up and running, though people seem to be staying away because they still think the flea market hasn't recovered from a blaze at the building in April.

The 77-year-old Myrtle Beach resident has been there about a dozen years, using the income from her store to supplement her Social Security.

She lost everything, which she estimated was worth about \$2,000, in the fire.

"I didn't have insurance," she said. "Nobody did."

Coming back hasn't been easy.

"We had this friend and he had quit doing it," Naseef said. "He sold stuff to us cheap so we could make a little money."

The flea market, on a little more than six acres on U.S. 17, is open Friday through Sunday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., according to its Web site.

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