



"Ebony Angels" by Donna Richardson and Jan Anderson. "Ballerinas" by Wes Louie.

Determined mom launches line of ethnically inspired wallcoverings Montgomery Wallcoverings, Inc. blazes a trail in multicultural decorating

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BY PAT HIGGINS

Imagine being 16 years old, flipping through magazines and suddenly realizing that among all the photos of beautiful young women, none look like you. That was how Danielle Montgomery felt as a teen. "I remember wondering what was wrong with me that I never saw myself in any of the pictures," Danielle remembers. "It really affected my self-esteem."

There was nothing wrong with Danielle. The simple fact is she is that she was an African-American woman, and 20 years ago, girls from ethnic minorities were underrepresented in most publications.

Danielle repressed her teenage angst and went on to graduate from college, become a librarian, marry and have three children. Her memories emerged five years ago, however, when she and her husband, Derek, bought their first home. "We were so excited to finally have a place of our own that I immediately began thinking of ways to decorate it," Danielle recalls.

To start, Danielle set out to find wallpaper for her young daughter's bedroom. She knew exactly what she wanted for daughter Dasia: a border picturing young African-American dancers. But the mom searched in vain for the design. "I wanted a ballerina theme for Dasia because she loves to dance. I looked and looked. I went to multiple stores and spent hours searching for a ballerina border with an image of a black child," Danielle says.

Danielle finally went to a specialty wallpaper store and asked if anything like what she wanted even existed. "I couldn't believe it, but they told me no! The more I looked, the more I noticed I didn't see black kids in anything," Danielle exclaims. "Then I started to realize I didn't see anything multicultural." For Dasia's room, Danielle settled on butterflies and quietly pondered her failed quest.

"What hit me hardest," says Danielle "is the wallpaper search made me remember exactly how I felt as a teenager. I couldn't believe it. Here it is the 21st cen-



"Abstract Masks" is the creation of Danielle's first partner, Angel Jones, a groundbreaking artist in ethnic design.

tury, and I didn't think my children should feel what I felt as a child."

But Danielle was a woman of action. Rather than stew in frustration, she allowed an idea to simmer: if the wallpaper manufacturers didn't care to create multicultural images, why not produce that product herself? "First I got mad; then the wheels started turning, and I began to believe I could create the wallpaper myself," Danielle recalls.

It took almost five years for Danielle to bring her idea to market. It also took research, travel and capital to be able to offer a boutique line of ethnically inspired wallpaper borders through her new company, Montgomery Wallcoverings, Inc.

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— Danielle Montgomery

Danielle's heart-tugging motivation to spare her children the doubts she once felt was backed by an innate business sense. Born on a German military base and educated at Florida A&M and Florida State universities, the Alexandria, VA native was no stranger to diverse cultures. And as a trained research specialist, Danielle also recognized an opportunity when she saw it.

The latest tallies showed that the wallpaper industry totaled \$1.04 billion in sales; borders accounted for \$305 million of that, according to HFN newspaper, a trade publication. Marketing demographics further revealed that the industry overlooks an estimated 13 million African-American households annually, not to mention other ethnic homes. "How could the manufacturers just ignore an entire population?" Danielle asked as she researched the industry.

Within a year, Danielle met artist Angel Jones, who was designing ethnic wallpaper but had not yet been published. "I am by no means an artist," Danielle explains, "so finding Angel to partner with was the perfect first step."

The pair dabbled with designs and business ideas for a few years, but they didn't become serious until 2002, when they decided to attend the national Wallcoverings Association Conference. "It cost \$1000 each just to register, and that was a lot of money for us, but with hard work and the support of family and friends, we raised the funds," Danielle recalls.

At the conference, the women learned how expensive it was to produce a simple border. "The large manufacturers make this up in volume, but when you're an independent, that's tough," Danielle explains.

Danielle returned from the conference armed with knowledge but lacking capital. "Finding start-up funds took a good portion of our initial development," Danielle says. During this time, Angel and Danielle decided to separate as partners, but Angel continued to



Danielle Montgomery's family is her greatest source of inspiration. Her children (from L to R), Dekari, 9, Dasia, 7, and Danai, 2, are the role models for her designs. Husband Derek (far right) is her "silent partner," an instrumental player in the success of Montgomery Wallcoverings.

work as an artist for Montgomery Wallcoverings through her design house, Diverse Decor.

A lucky break came for Danielle when the company's concept won a contest last fall to attend the Hampton Roads Venture Capital Fair. "The fair was a way for venture capitalists and entrepreneurs to meet and discuss business," Danielle explains. But Hurricane Isabel reared its ugly head during the event, keeping most of the venture capitalists at home. "I didn't find a backer that night," Danielle recalls, "but I did find a business consultant who loved my concept so much she agreed to work with me pro bono." Nicole Nelson of Custom Made Consulting took Danielle under her wing, and within the year, Montgomery Wallcoverings was funded and up and running.

Danielle also credits her husband, Derek, as an instrumental player in the creation of her business. "Derek is my silent partner. Not one time in the last five years did he put one doubt or obstacle in my way," Danielle says. The Montgomery children, Dekari, 9, Dasia, 7, and Danai, 2, are the role models for Danielle's designs.

"Home should be a reflection of you and your family. Our mission is to provide beautiful, affordable, quality wallpapers for the woman of ethnic background," Danielle says. "When a woman is decorating a home or office and thinks African, ethnic or multicultural, we want her to think Montgomery Wallcoverings."

*Some information for this story was taken from a press release by Nia Nigra Meeks.

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