Turning a Hobby into a Career

Diane Spadola (GSM’86) traded her corporate job for work as a body painter

DIANE SPADOLA CALLS it the “she does what?” conversation. When new acquaintances try to guess what she does for a living since she left a successful career at the pharmaceutical company Merck, their questions can take a strange turn.

They ask if the job involves sales or requires a uniform. Spadola tells them that she runs her own business and that she does, indeed, have something to sell. She’ll hint that she’s in entertainment and that she works mostly weekends, in malls, restaurants, nightclubs, and private homes. Mulling this information, they ask if she’s a musician or a dancer. No? A stripper? A madam? Ah, no, and definitely not. But the work does involve naked bodies, she’ll say, mostly women’s. A mud wrestler?

“At that point, they usually give up,” says Spadola (GSM’86), “or I am laughing so hard, I blurt out, ‘I am a professional face painter, body painter, and party entertainer.’”

Spadola is principal artist and owner of Bella Faccia Painting, whose services include face painting, makeup artistry, and professional entertainment for events like children’s parties, bar and bat mitzvahs, and fundraisers. Its sister division, Living Canvas Creations, is a body art company whose artists paint clothing, logos, or other designs on models and private clients.

Her work is not to be confused with the simple flowers or butterflies that vendors paint on children’s cheeks at street fairs. Rather, she can transform a child’s face into a tiger’s or a princess’, and her body art can turn an adult into a race car driver, or as she did one day last fall, a Rockette.

“My ultimate goal is to make people look at my work and say, ‘Is that real or is that clothing?’” she says. “I want to use it as a way of attracting attention—not in an erotic or objectionable fashion, but in an ‘is it real or not?’ way.”

There isn’t much in Spadola’s life that would hint at the sharp turn her career took in 2002, when she stepped off the corporate ladder. After earning an MBA at BU’s Graduate School of Management, she joined Merck, where she worked her way up from drug representative to a succession of marketing and sales positions.

Her career required a lot of travel, and Spadola began looking for a hobby that would allow her to spend time with her two young daughters. The girls had always enjoyed having their faces painted, so she did some research and started practicing. She had no fine arts training—and no particular artistic talent. “I truly am the person who can’t make a stick figure,” she says. But she drew on her experience applying theatrical makeup in high school productions and quickly became adept. “I understood the concept of making somebody look old, putting on a beard, changing their facial structure.”

She began taking classes and attending conventions and workshops. She practiced on her kids and their friends and Brownie troops. Soon Spadola was enjoying her new hobby so much that she longed to spend more time at it than her full-time job allowed. She resigned from Merck in 2002.

These days, Spadola’s clients are mostly party hosts who want to hold a memorable and talked-about event; they might request paint-on costumes for a masquerade party or tuxedos for New Year’s Eve. For a recent 30th birthday party, the organizers wanted models “wearing” basketball jerseys with the number 30. “We had 16 models and 5 body painters on site, and we did 5 girls every hour,” Spadola recalls. She also has individual clients who want to be painted and photographed for personal use. “The most common request for body painting is something like a bustier or a corset,” she says. “Sporting ideas—football and basketball jerseys, baseball uniforms—are also very common.”

She works with seven independent contractors, whom she trained to paint. Her 15-year-old daughter has become a talented face painter, and her 13-year-old does tattoos. She also has a group of freelancers, who do balloon sculpting, hair braiding, clowning and magic, juggling, and photography.

Spadola believes that body painting is coming into its own. It’s de rigueur at trade shows, marketing events, even the Grammys.

“I love what I do,” she says. “It’s fun, it’s very unusual, and I’m a naturally gregarious person, so it gets me out there. Every day is different.” CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI