

It's a bag and a toy. But wait, there's more...



Tina Hill hand-draws the designs for her Kidsacks, which are silkscreened at Smyth Graphics in Merrimac. (Joanne Rathe/Globe Staff)

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As a child and even through high school, Tina Hill was always drawing and daydreaming.

She still is. But now, instead of it getting her in trouble, it's fueling a new business - Kidsack.

The company, which she launched in October 2007, creates backpacks for kids ages 4 to 10. The canvas bags feature her original designs, which can be colored with washable markers, washed, and colored again.

"What I have is first in a new category," said Hill. "I have a backpack made out of environmentally friendly fabric that is creative."

Nancy Streeter, owner of the Newburyport toy store Eureka, was one of the first people Hill approached to sell the Kidsack. "I love giving local people a break and encouraging them," Streeter said. "It's a nice product and she's constantly worked to upgrade it. And it's eco-friendly and reusable. I like that."

Aimee Oliver, owner of Giggles in Hamilton, said she looks for items that are not mass-marketed to sell in her store. Kidsack fit the bill. "It's very good quality and

unique," she said. "And it's good for a child's self-esteem that he has colored it himself."

Kristen Pollard of Mud Puddle Toys in Marblehead also likes the "green" aspect of the backpack. "It's a creative product you can use over and over. It's not something you do once, and toss it."

For Hill, a 44-year-old mother of four, ages 13, 11, 8, and 7, the business was born out of necessity. "I needed to make money and I was struggling with how," she said.

A graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, Hill worked in the fashion industry for 12 years, leaving when she was pregnant with her third child. She and her family moved to West Newbury five years ago.

When it came time to look for a job, she said, "There was nothing in this area in the fashion industry."

"I knew I wanted to do something creative," she added. "So, I thought if I can't find a job, I'm going to make my own job."

Walking her children to the bus stop one day, she noticed a neighborhood child wearing a nylon backpack. "It just hit me," she said. "I'm going to do a backpack kids can color."

She reconnected with some fashion industry contacts and found a company that was making a new canvas fabric from recycled cotton and plastic soda bottles. "I loved the idea of it being environmentally friendly," she said.

Then she found companies to supply the draw cords, grommets, and washable markers. Hill also found Andrew LeBlanc Co. in Georgetown to cut and sew the bags and Smyth Graphics in Merrimac to silkscreen her designs - which she draws by hand - onto the bags.

"That was it," Hill said. "It all happened quickly."

Hill started with four design themes, sports, a castle, jungle, and sea life. And she also does custom designs, such as a music-themed bag for a local music school.

"The kids love them," said Cassie Lees, of the West Newbury School of Music. "They put their music [sheets] in them. And they can be personalized. Almost every kid here has one, but they are all different."

Along the way, Hill, who said she had no business background, has become a savvy marketer.

The backpacks can be found on her website, www.kidsack.com, as well as on several eco-friendly product websites and catalogs, such as Green Feet and Kate's Caring Gifts. Hill now has a few sales representatives and the bag is being sold in stores around the country.

The Kidsack sells for \$11 wholesale, and generally retails for about double that. In 2008, the firm sold 3,101 bags, earning \$30,780, and breaking even the first full year in business.

"She is very persistent, which is good because she is not just letting things happen. She is out there selling her product," said Pollard, of Mud Puddle Toys. "In any economy you need that, but especially in this economy."

A big step for Hill was breaking into the resort market. She's designed custom bags for the Beaches and Sandals Caribbean resorts, the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman, and others. The bags are sold in the resorts' gift shops.

Hill said she already has ideas for a second, third, and fourth product to expand her line. And she is clearly having fun. "I'm going back to my roots," she said. "I've always loved to draw and that's what I'm doing."■