

# Entrepreneur of the Month

## Tanaya Ewell, North Carolina

**Home:** Elizabeth City, North Carolina  
**Businesses:** Simply Divine Fabrics & Things  
**E-mail:** [tanayae72@yahoo.com](mailto:tanayae72@yahoo.com)  
**Phone:** 252-267-7568  
**Organizational help from:** River City Community Development Corporation,  
<http://www.rivercitycdc.org>

## Fabric Store Owner Finds Niche in Small Town North Carolina with help of CDC

Tanaya Ewell grew up in New York City watching her mother sew everything from aprons to wedding dresses to make some extra money.

“I was just always around her sewing,” Ewell said. But throughout years of nursing school, a nursing career and having four children, she didn’t have much time to sew herself. After her fourth child was born, Ewell set up a home daycare service in small town Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

“That’s when I started getting in to sewing again. I would sew and sew – early in the morning, when the children napped, after they went to bed. I was sewing blankets, clothes and even a frilly Easter dress for one of the children I watched,” she added.

Ewell, 36, then decided to pursue her passion at another level and opened up a fabric store in May 2007. Selling bolts and bolts of fabric, notions and her custom-made creations, she’s found her niche in a downtown historic district that’s being revitalized.

With assistance from the River City Community Development Corporation (CDC), Ewell found an outlet for her talent while helping revitalize historic downtown Elizabeth City. She shared her inspirational tale with an audience at a Center for Rural Entrepreneurship meeting in Kill Devil Hills, NC.

“I loved being on that panel and meeting people,” Ewell said. “And the biggest surprise was almost selling out of the (custom-sewn) handbags I brought just as examples of my work!”

### **Sewing Seeds for a Successful Business: Help from the CDC**

Nearly two years ago, when Ewell met with Angie Wills from the River City CDC, she wasn’t the only one in town interested in opening a fabric store.

“What happened at that time was that our Super Wal-Mart eliminated their fabric department,” said Wills, a small business developer with the CDC. “This actually gave our small business owners a big opportunity, and several folks approached me asking about opening a fabric store.”

Wills explained that the River City CDC is a nonprofit community-based organization that provides a variety of services to residents of Elizabeth City and surrounding areas. Since 1990, the

CDC has offered services in housing, business and economic development, youth programming and cultural awareness under the leadership of Lenora Jarvis-Mackey, President/CEO.

For Ewell, Wills provided one-on-one counseling, feasibility assessments, statistical studies and demographics, help in creating a business plan, cash flow projections, putting together a loan package and an ongoing mentoring relationship – all free of charge. They worked with local banks as well as non-traditional sources of financing such as start-up funds from the North Carolina Rural Center.

“It’s our goal to make sure that we are counseling people to succeed,” Wills said.

Ewell opened Simply Divine Fabrics & Things in May 2007.

But to help assure her success and compete with the other fabric stores in town, Wills asked Ewell an important question: “Ok, you’ll open a fabric store, but what else can you do?”

Wills wanted Ewell to diversify and find a niche with value-added products or services. That’s when Ewell sewed a laptop computer bag for Wills, and when the idea for her custom bags was born.

Wills added, “She just sewed me this very trendy bag and I told her, ‘You’re on to something here.’ I told her to put her sewing cap on and think of other things like this she could do.”

She came up with initialized and embroidered custom-made bags and other sewed gems that popped with color and personality. With her plans for a fabric store and custom sewing business, Ewell went to Wills for help with marketing materials and a business plan.

Wills assisted with a loan package and Ewell found herself in a small storefront a bit removed from the hustle and bustle of Elizabeth City. Wills thought Ewell needed more visibility and went to her when a retail space opened downtown.

### **Historic District offers Visibility and Opportunity**

Located where the narrows of the Pasquotank River open up and the river begins widening out on its course to the Albemarle Sound, Elizabeth City is the economic and commercial hub of the northeastern North Carolina mainland. Although it was founded in 1793, it did not take on economic importance until the Dismal Swamp Canal was completed in 1805. The Canal linked the sounds and rivers of northeastern North Carolina with the port of Norfolk, allowing area planters and lumber companies a safe and quick method of transporting their goods to market.

Today, the canal is a means of transportation for thousands of pleasure boaters on the Intracoastal Waterway, and Elizabeth City has become a favorite stop. The town's waterfront has experienced a revitalization that includes new docks and boat facilities, shops, and most recently, the Museum of the Albemarle's new facility. The Museum interprets over 400 years of local history and heritage of the region.

Ewell’s new downtown spot boasted the same rent with triple the square footage.

“What’s happening is that Elizabeth City is really expanding right now,” Ewell said. “You have a great waterfront with lots of foot traffic, shops, the public library and several festivals throughout the year. I wanted to take advantage of all of that.”

Wills added, “The best way to grow a business is to go out in the community and be visible.”

Ewell also looked into locating in area strip malls outside of the city, but she found rents to be double and triple what she pays downtown for her 2300 square-foot space. Right now her inventory is up front and she uses the back of her store for sewing machines and a workshop area.

One of her marketing tactics has been to create community events, such as a lesson on making tablecloths or a recent workshop for children and their dads to come in and make homemade Mother’s Day gifts.

The disadvantage in her new location is lack of parking, but it hasn't seemed to deter old and new customers. And she's added quite a few new ones in the new location, including some business to business work such as the custom-made bags and costumes she did for the local dance studio.

### **Young Store, Big Plans**

Simply Divine Fabric & Things boasts about 150 bolts of fabric, needles, threads, buttons, zippers and other notions as well as pillow forms and – most importantly – advice from Ewell for her clients.

“My favorite part of this business is talking to customers and seeing all the creative things that they are working on,” she said. “They really inspire me and what I do at the store.”

Ewell has a flock of loyal customers; including one she calls ‘Miss Fabrics & Things,’ a retiree who donates her time to helping Ewell with special events and programming in the store.

In the future, Ewell said she would like to hire one or two employees, but she'd also like to continue to develop her custom-made work to the point where it can take off as a brand on its own with the potential for broader sales on the Internet.

Another future endeavor could involve boating.

At a Center for Rural Entrepreneurship meeting, Ewell sat on a panel with Paul Mann of Paul Mann Custom Boats. Mann builds multi-million dollar custom yachts on the coast of North Carolina. Wills was at that meeting and said Mann talked to Ewell about possibly working together in the future. Nothing has materialized yet, but Ewell and Mann's wife have stayed in touch and they would like to bring Ewell down to visit their business.

With four children and a husband in the Navy stationed in Japan, Ewell has more than just her own business to run. But she manages to carve out time to run it well. She's not making as much yet as she did with her daycare business, but she's on her way.

“What's amazing is that she's been able to sustain and grow this business in the economic times that we're having right now,” Wills said. “It's a tough time for small business owners, but because of her passion for this work, she is succeeding.”

“I'm excited about this business. I really believe that Tanaya has a lot of potential. I'm very confident that she will continue to grow.”

*-By Lisa Bauer, 05/08*

### **For more information on...**

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to <http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org>

... the River City CDC, to <http://www.rivercitycdc.org>