



### **Finding the Entrepreneur Within Herself: Shirley Williams and Vanceboro Apparel**

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North Carolina has the largest number of textile and apparel jobs in the nation. But since January 2000, the state has lost more than a third of those jobs and 65,000 people have been thrown out of work. In the tiny town of Vanceboro, however, there's a rare tale of success: one woman has kept her sewing factory running against the odds.

Vanceboro is a typical eastern North Carolina town. It has quiet streets with wood-framed bungalows. Folks will say 'hey' even if you're not one of the 900 people who live here. On Main Street, there are two beauty salons and two grocery stores, and Pat's Soda Shop with its famous orangeades. And just beyond the only traffic light, there's a one-story brick-and-glass building that's the site of a quiet triumph.

Shirley Williams is the owner-manager of Vanceboro Apparel. Working in a sewing factory is the thing Shirley Williams knows best. She's done it for 31 years. According to Shirley, "I was 19 years old. I started off as a machine operator in Washington, North Carolina. And of course you would change from job to job, doing the same thing, because that's what I liked to do."

The company Williams started out with moved to Mexico. The next one went to Honduras. After that she worked as the manager at Dutton Manufacturing in downtown Vanceboro, making good on orders for pajamas, robes and hospital gowns. In the spring of 2001, it looked like Dutton would be closing, too. The owner was tired of struggling against the pressures of globalization. But instead of moving south, the company owner offered to sell the plant to Williams.

“When he asked me about buying the company,” says Williams, “it was kind of like a challenge. I’m like, ‘I don’t know.’ And then when he let me know that if I didn’t, he would shut it down, I knew I had to make a move of some sort to keep us in business.” Williams had her 25 co-workers on her mind. “I thought about, well, you can go find you another job, you can work right out of the home. But then – how about the other girls that work with you? A lot of them were older; they did not want to go back to school nor change style of work. So I’m like, ‘well, if they’ll stick with me, we can do it right here in Vanceboro.’”

The workers decided to stick with Williams, and so did most of the company’s previous customers. But Williams still had to buy out the owner. When she went looking for a small business loan to do that, though, the bank rejected her outright. She had no equity, no track record of ownership, and she was in a business with uncertain prospects.

“I was turned down because of, I’m thinking more or less, the textile industry itself,” says Williams. “But you know, they told me, ‘when you be in business for two years, come back, then we can talk again.’ So I’m like, ‘Two years? I need money now.’”

Then Williams found the Metropolitan Business Development Center in nearby Washington. It’s a non-profit group started by the local AME Zion church. It aims to improve the lives of low- and moderate-income people. Metropolitan’s economic developer, Ross Steckley, didn’t tell Williams she couldn’t have a loan. Instead, he asked how much of a low interest loan she thought the company could shoulder, and worked from there. He also helped her develop a business plan.

According to Steckley, “Shirley was an individual that demonstrated a proven capacity of staying power. She had indicated to us her expertise and her willingness to take a hard road ahead, even if it might be a long hard road, with not a lot of return, but a lot of satisfaction from making it happen.”

Besides that, Steckley says, encouraging the growth of small business is the most promising way for a little community like Vanceboro to cope with job loss. “If we re-invest more money in small businesses within our rural areas, in a major way, we’re going to benefit in the long run – versus waiting for some big industry to land, and then keeping people on unemployment or having them dislocated to move to another area.”

In October 2001, with a loan from Metropolitan, Shirley Williams became the owner of Vanceboro Apparel. She’s had her share of challenges. “Sometimes you have to set a couple of hours aside, to pray and ask God to help you – show me, God, what I need to do, to make sure there’s work for next week. And I’ve done that a lot.”

So far, Williams has figured out how to stay afloat. She keeps her overhead low by doing the accounting and administration herself – jobs a company normally pays other people to do. She’s fortunate to have customers who pay as soon as the products are shipped so the cash flow is pretty steady. Williams has learned to juggle the bills, leaving money for

fixed costs like rent and lights. She staggers the work shifts. Sometimes the women at Vanceboro apparel work a short week – say, 24 hours – but they take some kind of paycheck home every week. Williams has even cut her own pay when business got slow. But the one thing she won't sacrifice is quality. "It has to be made right in order for it to sell."

The 25 women who work at Vanceboro Apparel make somewhere between \$5.15 (minimum wage) and \$8 an hour. That might not seem like much to wealthy urban dwellers, but to these ladies, it's a lot. Mary Jones sets sleeves on a hospital gown and her hands glide over the fabric with the ease of long practice. "I think we are just blessed that Shirley, she's constantly trying to prepare for work to come in so we'll have something to do, you know, because there's a lot of companies that's going out of business. And I just thank God she is looking out for us, that we can come in here to work."

Jones and her friend of decades, Ida Mabrey, say they have something else you can't measure in numbers. Completing each others' sentences, they say, "And we's a family, I mean, everybody's family is everybody's family. Yes. And we care for one another. We're concerned about one another. But it starts with Shirley, now. She's like, she's the mother hen." Nearby, sewing pockets on a pair of pants, Janice Barrow agrees. "If you've got a problem, she'll help you with it. She'll sit down, she'll show you exactly what to do, and that makes a lot of difference. And you know, when you get through, you've got a certain American-made pride in it."

That American-made pride is also important to 32-year-old Darryl Boone, Williams' right-hand man. Boone says he's tired of hearing all the government talk about the economy improving, when he can see otherwise. Vanceboro Apparel, he says, is an effort by local people to help themselves. "Yes, it's a different way to do things – because we work here to build an economy. Thirty people, that's 30 people in a job. That's helping the economy just as well as a company that's got five employees, a company that's got 600 employees."

All the while that the workers are talking, Williams stands at the back of the sewing room, working a seam ripper through a pair of pants. She does alterations for a local dry cleaner to bring in extra income. Since she took the helm, Williams hasn't had to lay anybody off. And now that she's been in business for two years, she can get certified to bid for government contracts, which could bring Vanceboro Apparel more stability. Williams also wants to start her own line of scrubs and hospital wear. Ross Steckley, the economic developer who helped Williams with her first loan, says she's in a good position to do that. "She's going to be able to get in front of some lenders that traditionally would have laughed at her. And she can come to them now with a portfolio that, 'hey, I've been in business two years, and you guys thought I wouldn't make it. Here I am, I'm still here,' and that has a lot of weight."

In the meantime, Shirley Williams keeps on doing what she can to bring in money for Vanceboro Apparel. Sometimes, she even moonlights. She's a consultant for other local

businesses that want to get started. Shirley has found the entrepreneur within herself and now she's helping others tap that entrepreneurial spirit.