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## Accountant finds new career in specialty jeans

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Founding a booming business does not always translate to a healthy self-esteem.

Lee Ann Park, 41, an accountant with a thriving financial systems consulting firm, knows this first hand.

"I was confident job-wise, but I felt bad about myself from an appearance standpoint," said Park. "Nothing ever fit me. The hardest thing was to get jeans to fit."

Rather than continue her frustration, the Palm Beach Gardens resident took matters into her own hands. Now, as she develops another business, she feels good about how she looks.

In 2001, while vacationing in San Diego, she took her son Joshua on a shopping trip. She became so discouraged while trying on jeans that he encouraged her to make her own. He even came up with a business name: Little in the Middle.

Park began her mission to create a signature collection of jeans for women with small waists and slightly larger hips. She set out to determine if there was a need for clothing that truly fit a woman's curves by conducting a Web-based survey.

The response was great. Women began voicing the same challenges with finding jeans designed to fit their bodies, and not that of a fashion model.

"I would get stories very similar to mine," Park said. "They would tell me 'I hate shopping and getting dressed in the morning.'"

Park next worked with a moderator to hold focus groups to discuss the need for changing women's clothing to reflect a better fit.

"Sometimes ignorance is good," Park said. "I had no experience with research."

Park verified what she had suspected all along, that she was not the only woman with the same frustration.

From there, she and her mother, herself a professional seamstress, began speaking with the owner of a high-end fabric store that deals primarily with designers. He led her to a technical professional who could source the product.

"I met with him, told him my vision and was able to get sample products within a short period of time," Park said. "It's easy for a seamstress to do this, but to be mass produced I needed a technical packet.

"The first thing I did was get a pair of jeans that kind of fit me. Next, I made modifications, such as the back coming up higher and lowering the front. That's how we came up with a style and a pattern."

By October 2005, Park had her first sample.

"I didn't have a big-picture vision," Park said. "I wanted to see if I could even get the right product produced."

When she got the pattern, she ordered three of each size and started handing them out for people to wear and give feedback. Her denim line offers a patented one-of-a-kind sizing chart that uses the traditional woman's size at the waist, but allows for a little more room in the rear. For example, a size 6.1 is a pair of jeans with a waist size 6, but a size 8 in the hips and thighs.

Park said, "I loved my pair. The feedback was very positive."

Once Park decided she had the right pattern and knew what she wanted, the priority became getting production consistency and with the least amount paid for the best quality. The first runs were in China but now she is in the process of moving production to El Paso, Texas.

"It became a quality-control issue with the travel time, inconsistency and the growth that China's going through," she said. "It was not a significant cost savings and if I'm selling my product and my name's on it I want it to be good quality."

Park's next challenge was marketing. She didn't think the jeans would succeed just hanging in a store, so she began looking at options to market directly to consumers, such as home parties and Stylish Housewives, an outfit based in Chicago and Los Angeles that would host trunk shows.

Sales have increased every month, so much so that her current challenge is keeping up with demand.

"I absolutely did not think it would be this successful," Park said. "The purpose was to get the jeans out there so people can feel like they're normal. I want to create an awareness to help women feel good about their shape and themselves.

"Women who buy my jeans have a particular shape, and catering to that is unique in the fashion industry," she said. "Most clothing lines are marketed to a specific demographic and income, but a person's body shape does not fall within a specific demographic and income. It is not about what you are wearing, but how you are wearing it and how it fits! I want people to wear 'Little in the Middle' proud and confident."

As part of her business plan, Park is working with the National Eating Disorder Association.

"We are working on a high-profile fashion show in late February in New York. The whole thing is about wearable runway fashion where you don't have to be 5-feet, 10 inches and (weigh) 100 pounds. 'Love yourself. Love your jeans.' is the current theme."

Park is gearing up for that to be a full national launch.

In the meantime, Park is marketing the jeans as far away as Australia and the United Kingdom. Stores including The Pink Turtle in Chelsea, Michigan, Kiwi's Boutique in Chicago, Illinois and Stalaro's in Vallejo, Calif., are also contacting her for more stock. The jeans are also sold online at [www.truejeans.com](http://www.truejeans.com) and through Stylish Housewives home parties.

Park also is planning to expand her business to additional retail stores as well as her own Web site, [www.littleinthemiddle.com](http://www.littleinthemiddle.com).

Park plans to expand her offerings to include denim skirts, jackets, shorts, capris, active and business wear.

Although Park believes in her idea 100 percent and she is experiencing early success, she continues as a consultant in financial software and accounting, as she has been doing for the past 10 years.

"In the fashion business, they say don't quit your day job," Park said.

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