

She wraps 'em up, and they grab 'em up

By William Steif
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CHRISTIANSTED, St. Croix — Twila Wilson is 6 feet tall and has done more for the sarong than Dorothy Lamour.

Tens of thousands of American women now wear them because of Twila.

She is 33, a string bean with a sense of humor, straight blonde hair and a head for business. Five years ago she began importing sarongs from Indonesia. She called her company "Java Wraps" and shared space with a florist in a tiny shop in this U.S. Virgin Islands town. Last year her firm grossed \$2 million. She owns two shops here, one in St. Thomas, one in St. Maarten, and supplies her line to stores on 30 islands from Trinidad to Guam, and to about 300 resort shops from Florida to Maine.

"Our gross has doubled every year since we've been in business," she says. "But this year we're conservative. We expect only a 30 percent growth."

Most business people would kill for growth like that.

The net profit isn't bad, either. She says that if a sarong costs \$10 in Indonesia, "you add 40 percent to that for landing it in the U.S. and then double the price." That means a sarong arriving in the U.S. for \$14 sells for \$28.

Twila was born in Missouri and grew up in Security, Colo., where her father was a construction worker. She went to Colorado State University at Fort Collins, Colo., graduated in interior design "with a concentration in textiles" and got a Denver department store job as a junior designer, her first big-city exposure.

"It was fun going into people's homes to do carpets or upholstery," she says. "And I made good money."

So good that in 1971, after a year on the job, she went to Europe for three months, stopped en route home "and fell in love with New York." She answered the ad of a firm starting to import goods and was sent to Singapore, Indonesia and Africa "to buy and design, taking their motifs and stylizing them for the American market." She held that job more than three years, took another design job in London and then "decided to relax and take a year off in the Virgin Islands. She brought along her collection of antique sarongs "and everybody here wanted to see them."

She cleaned up a room at the rear of a Christiansted nightclub and had a show, pricing the sarongs at \$200 to \$250 a piece. She says:

"A gentleman approached me and asked what I'd do if someone offered \$3,000 for the entire collection. I said I'd use \$1,000 to pay off my car and the other \$2,000 to go back to Indonesia to buy some more. 'Then the deal's done,' he said, and wrote a check. We put 'sold' signs on everything."

She expected sales resistance, especially from men, to the idea of tying on pieces of batik cloth. There was none, though she hastily explains "the concept's been around thousands of years." The sarong is a *pareo* in South America, *lavolava* in the South Pacific, *parieu* in French-speaking Africa, and *longi* in India.

"People from other islands began coming here to buy," she says. "The first were from Tortola (in the British Virgins). It was a young business; we had to dole out the sarongs carefully."

The florist offered to share space and soon was squeezed out because the sarong business was so good. A local lawyer became a partner and helped get bank financing. At a critical moment Twila got a minority loan from the Small Business Administration; her minority was being female.

"We had people lining up to get in the shop," Twila recalls. "They wanted matching things, dresses, bikinis. We were forced into the fashion business."

Working with two New Orleans shop owners, Twila set up a sewing village in Java to complement her batik fabrics village. The work is a cottage industry, done at home. The two villages are five hours apart by road.

"Our production has grown by leaps and bounds," she says. "We have 3,000 people working at any given time in Java."

By 1978 she'd produced a full line of batik ready-to-wear — batik is the process of hand-printing textiles by coating with wax the parts not to be dyed. Now, she says, the ready-to-wear volume exceeds that of the sarongs. "We still have a difficult time getting enough sarongs," she says. "We put limits on how many each store can get."

Twila has 54 employees, the majority of her warehouse and office here. She wears a sarong "almost all the time." Each sarong buyer gets an instruction pamphlet in how to tie the 2 yard and 2½-yard cloths. There are instructions for men, too.

"There are about 10 ways to tie them," Twila says. "I adore the fabric. It's so beautiful I can't cut it up." But in Java, where she works six to eight weeks each summer, "the people use sarongs as skirts. They can't expose their shoulders because they're Moslems. I wear mine the Tahitian way."

And what happened to her original \$3,000 collection of antique sarongs?

"A year after I began my business the gentleman came to see me and said that if I'd let him keep three of the best, he'd sell me back all the rest at the original price. I did and he did."

The 16 Florida outlets carrying "Java Wraps" include Little Hawaii on Hollywood Beach and Maggie, Odyssey's End, The Tack Room and Trader Tom's in Ft. Lauderdale.



Suzanne Steif/Sun-Tattler photo

Wrapped up: Twila Wilson with a few of the sarongs that have brought a little bit of Tahiti to women around the world and success to their producer. Wilson's small business has the happy problem of finding enough orders, not enough buyers.