

Sticks and Stones outgrows its space

Keepsake company moves to larger North Peoria location, hires 35 workers

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By ANITA SZOKE of the Journal Star

PEORIA - The Peoria-based Internet business Sticks and Stones is growing by leaps and bounds.

The company, owned by husband and wife team Brad and Jera Deal of Peoria, is expanding, tripling its size with a new location in North Peoria near Alta. Thirty-five employees have been hired who start work on April 16, said Jera Deal.

"It's unbelievable, we are so excited," she said.

The business, which creates handmade keepsake gifts by framing black and white photographs of letters from objects found in nature and architecture, had been located in the basement of a small strip mall on Glen Avenue. The Deals did much of the work themselves, with family and friends helping when needed.

But ever since the company's products were featured in various national magazines and Web sites, sales soared and the Deals needed to find larger digs for their business and to house more inventory. Sticks and Stones does its business through mail order. "We just outgrew our space," she said.

The products have been featured in catalogs such as Frontgate's Grandin Road, on various Web sites such as www.uncommongoods.com, and on national television shows such as HGTV's "I Want That" series. The business also sells its products through its own Web site, www.createsticksandstones.com.

This month, the business will be featured in the "Editor's Picks" section of Better Homes and Gardens,

one of the largest lifestyle magazines with about eight million subscribers and 40 million readers a month. Oprah Winfrey's O Magazine is considering featuring the product in an upcoming issue.

Business grew 500 percent from last year and is projected to grow another 500 percent this year, Jera Deal said. "We are really starting to pick up some steam," she said.

The framed pieces are a conversation starter. Initially, the black and white photographs appear to be artistic shots of items or other unusual objects. But upon closer inspection, the letters take shape. The Deals have photos of objects that spell every letter of the alphabet and can spell any word as long as it's from the Roman alphabet.

Sticks and Stones started by accident, stemming from the family's hobby of finding letters in nature and architecture. As a way to introduce the alphabet to their daughters, the Deals began "letter hunting" on walks or while at the park. The family began taking black and white photographs of the letters spotted around the local area.

When Jera needed to find a thoughtful, inexpensive gift for an upcoming wedding, the family decided to create the bride's new last name using the letters.

Soon more friends and neighbors wanted their own pieces, and the business took off, Deal said. "The next big thing is O Magazine, which would be the pinnacle, but we're still waiting to hear," she said.

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