

Free Handing the Henna Business

Tattoo and gift shop owner polishes a career

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Once inside Free Hand Mehndi, a henna tattoo and gift shop located off the quiet street of Leavitt Avenue in the St. Johns district of north Portland, cloaked in a black berka, owner and artist Camille Mason, 27, locates a chair for me to sit and uncovers another hidden treasure beneath a pile of scarves for herself.

Within the blue-gray walls of her 606 square-foot, boutique-sized shop, there are over a half-dozen petite tables decorated with locally-made creations --marble-necklaces, beaded earrings, sparkling colored bracelets, laced scarves, mini-wooden paintings, and numerous other trinkets -- but a slight emptiness reigns the room.

The store, opened in February after Mason's online business of selling henna products boomed and she decided to expand into an actual location.

Nine years ago, Mason discovered her love for henna at her first henna party. At that time, she was



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Henna tattoo artist Camille Mason sits by the window of her Free Hand Mehndi shop in the St. Johns neighborhood of north Portland. The store is a salon, gift-shop, and home base to her online website that offers henna body art supplies.

planning for a career in nursing, taking pre-requisites part-time at Portland Community College, working for Comcast, and maintaining a website, where she bought imported items from India and sold them online.

A Portland native, Mason grew up painting, drawing, and sculpting with an artist mother in a family of

other artists, and thus fell naturally into the art of tattooing henna. Different from any material she had worked with, she said, "Body art really fascinated me," she said, "It's temporary and something you can show outwardly."

Becoming more enthused as she practiced on friends and acquaintances, Mason realized, "I don't

want to be a nurse," and in 2007, she pursued henna professionally. While she tattooed on holidays for tips, her website morphed into an online business, selling henna body art supplies.

A year later, her online business expanded with more than 40 products and on Youtube a henna-enthused following kept Mason busy

making over 200 videos of herself offering tutorials, reviews, tips, and tricks.

What started as a fledgling website and hobby transformed into a full-time online business, and she named it, Free Hand Mehndi --free-hand for her acquired style and Mehndi, the Hindi word for henna.

Not two years later, Mason began looking in the St. Johns neighborhood, where she had lived for quite some time, finding a new home base for Free Hand Mehndi. With all the funding in place, she moved in and set up shop.

However, after moving an online business from her apartment, Mason felt unsure about its future, "I know what works on the Internet, but that doesn't always translate for brick and mortar stores."

On a typical day at Free Hand Mehndi, Mason enters and cleans the store. Then she spends up to two hours with online upkeep--checking hundreds of e-mails, responding to customers, and updating all her social media outlets--YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

"I like to keep in contact with my customers," she says. After running for morning coffee, Mason opens the store. Despite keeping busy throughout the day --packaging internet orders, booking appointments, filming and editing new YouTube videos, Mason only tattoos about 15 percent of henna clients at the shop. More often, her appointments are booked outside of the store at client's homes or various other venues.

Mason realized she wasn't making the best use of her retail space, "I'm not a business major," she said. For her, the hardest thing about opening a store has been learning how to embrace mistakes and asking for help in the form of advice from established businesses.

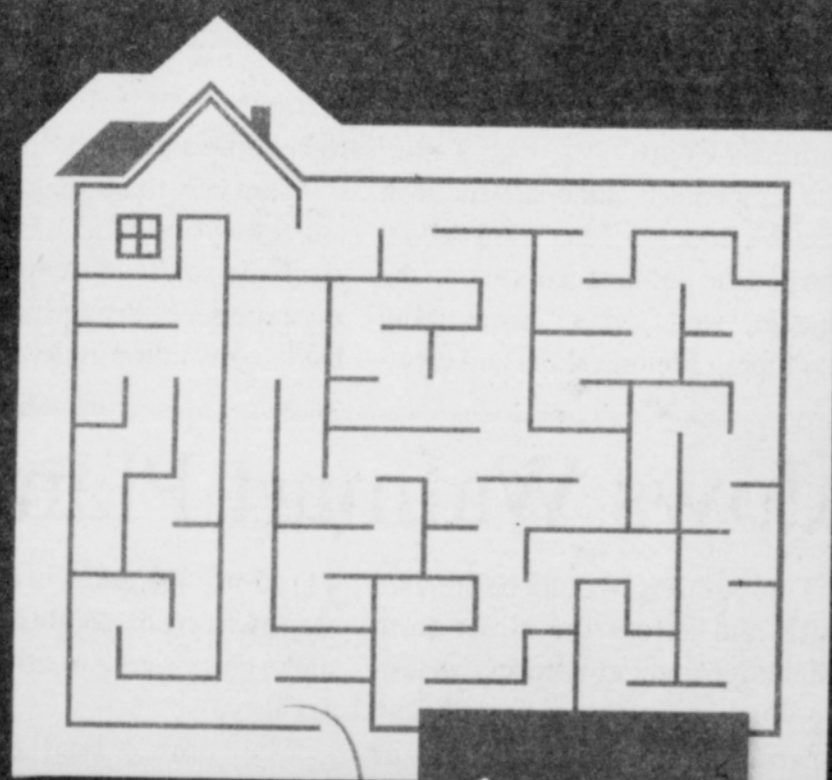
After seeking advice from local business counselors like Mercy Corps and SCORE, Mason decided to collaborate with a friend specializing in hair and make-up, who caters largely to Muslim women, and expand the use of her store.

Under the same store name, the back half will be re-modeled as a salon and the front half will remain a gift shop, and while Mason continues to work out of the store to tattoo, she "hopes the business will become stable."

Nonetheless, for Mason, the art of henna will always be a constant despite the unpredictable nature of the business world.

Mason specializes in 5 different regional styles, Indian, Arabic, Moroccan, Gulf or Khaalejee, and Indo-Arabic fusion. The designs vary from the dense and delicate, lace-like florals, peacocks, and paisleys of India to the geometric

FREE YOUR HOME.




Whether you're living in a farmhouse, a bungalow or an apartment, your path to reducing your energy costs is *easier than ever* at energytrust.org/free. Get started with an Energy Saver Kit, a Home Energy Review or Fridge Recycling.



This is new. This is now. This is free. Log onto energytrust.org/free or call **1.866.368.7878**.

Serving customers of Portland General Electric, Pacific Power, NW Natural and Cascade Natural Gas.


EnergyTrust
of Oregon

continued ▼ on page 7