

Queen of Clean

Mompreneur Debbie Wiener '80 turned a moment of desperation into an enterprise

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Debbie Wiener '80 describes her home-decorating style as part Martha Stewart, part World Wrestling Entertainment. It's a mix that has propelled her into the stratosphere as the "Slobproof!" maven, a Maryland-based interior designer who has created a brand for people who want homes and furniture that can stand up to the realities of life in a time-crunched world with kids, pets, and yes, even slob. She's written a book, *Slob Proof! Real-Life Home Decorating Solutions*; developed a line of her own environmentally and family-friendly furniture; and invented a gadget—the Paint Pen—for household touchups. Her company, Designing Solutions, is the top-ranked interior design firm in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

No small feat for a woman who arrived at UNH planning to become a writer—at least until she took a business class with Manley Irwin, then professor of economics. "That class was like going to a Broadway show," Wiener says. "He was a brilliant, entertaining, innovative storyteller. This guy became the biggest influence in my life."

Suddenly she wanted to be a trustbuster for consumers in the nation's capital. With Irwin's connections, Wiener headed to Washington her senior year for an internship with the Federal Communications Commission. After that she stayed in D.C. and had a successful career in the chemical industry, advising companies on compliance with EPA regulations. Following the birth of her first son, Sam, in 1991, Wiener decided to be a stay-at-home mother and somehow managed to make ends meet—until the day her credit card was declined at Kmart while buying supplies for a school project. Unable to find a new job in the chemical industry, she decided her best option was to start her own business, capitalizing on the design advice she had been offering to friends for free.

"All I had going for me was a lot of chutzpah and some good taste," Wiener says. "But I was also desperate, and I knew I couldn't afford to fail."

She set up shop on a folding table in her unfinished basement, started perusing real estate listings in *The Washington Post*, and began sending handwritten notes touting her business to anyone in the area who had purchased a house worth more than \$400,000. She took paying gigs and spent hours getting on-the-job training at lectures at the Washington Design Center while becoming friendly with other "real" interior designers, calling them in as subcontractors when needed. Unable to afford advertising, Wiener wrote design articles for local newspapers to get her name out.

Her first big break came in 2005, when a client hired her for a multimillion-dollar home redesign. Then, in 2007, a *USA Today* feature prompted Penguin Publishing to ask if she'd write a home decorating book. "I had never really thought about writing a book, but I had gone to UNH to be a writer," she says. "When they asked what I'd call it, I said, 'Slobproof.'"

Soon after, Wiener began working with the owners of Crypton, a furniture fabric that repels stains, to design furniture under her brand. Then came the Paint Pen, a reusable, vacuum-sealed pen filled with paint that came to life after Sam, now a college student, saw her touching up baseboard molding with remnants from old paint cans and remarked that there had to be an easier way. Sam came up with a design and Wiener immediately went online in search of a manufacturer who could build a prototype. As she placed her first order for pens, Wiener met a *New York Times* reporter to whom she

pitched her Paint Pen product in an email; the reporter passed it along to her editor and the Times ran an article in the Home & Garden section. The following morning Wiener had 10,000 orders.

Today the pen is available on Amazon, at select retailers and at her website, Slobproof.com. "I'm always pitching myself, putting myself out there," Wiener says. "Sometimes it's a swing and a hit, sometimes it's a swing and a miss. But you never know unless you try."

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