

Alberta wedding planner turns hobby into home-based business. By Jeff Hale

In the front room of Sheila Dieterich's home in southeast Calgary is a photo of the preschool class she attended in her native Vancouver. Ms. Dieterich is the last child on the left in the top row, but she's hard to miss -- she's the only one wearing a wedding dress.

"I wouldn't let it go," says Ms. Dieterich, 36. "I always liked wearing a bride's dress."

Ms. Dieterich has made that early fascination pay off handsomely. From her home, she operates Sweet Beginnings, a franchised wedding consultation and décor business. She was recently named one of 75 franchisees of the year by the International Franchise Association, one of two Canadian winners. The other winners, Chris and Nicola Feist of ServiceMaster Clean -- a cleaning and restoration business -- are also located in Calgary.

The IFA gives out the award but it is the companies who select their top individual performers. Ms. Dieterich, who started with Sweet Beginnings in October, 2004, is the company's first operator to be chosen for the award.

"Sheila jumped in with both feet when she first came on board, and we've seen her plant those feet solidly in the Calgary market," said Rob Lancit, the chief executive officer of Sweet Beginnings. "She's grown the business so quickly we now have to look at selling parts of her territory because she can't keep up with the demand."

Neither Mr. Lancit nor Ms. Dieterich would reveal sales figures, but Mr. Lancit said Ms. Dieterich's earnings increased 45 per cent from her first to her second year. The average increase in that time is usually 25 to 30 per cent, Mr. Lancit said. Ms. Dieterich said she has organized "hundreds" of events since she started.

In addition to weddings, Sweet Beginnings plans and organizes family and corporate celebrations, although weddings are the bulk of the business. Ms. Dieterich advises on decorations, serves as a liaison with caterers and florists, and even gets involved in setting up and taking down decorations.

She operates her business from the front room in her home, what she calls "the velvet-roped room." In it are elegant centre pieces and chair covers that are offered as part of the Sweet Beginnings package. On a table removed from the displays, bridal magazines and Sweet Beginnings binders and catalogues are piled around a vase of Gerber daisies. In the binders and catalogues are possible colour and fabric combinations for prospective clients and photos showing events Ms. Dieterich has previously organized.

Mr. Lancit's wife, Elana, founded Sweet Beginnings in 1998. After receiving a favourable response to her planning of her own wedding, she went into business herself. Ms. Dieterich was likewise intrigued by Sweet Beginnings after using the service for her wedding in Toronto in 2002. When her husband, Dean, the corporate accounts manager

for an oil and gas waste-management company, was transferred to Calgary, Ms. Dieterich began casting about for a home-based business. Sweet Beginnings had started franchising itself and she signed on.

She stepped into a burgeoning market. From 2002 to 2006, Calgary has averaged 4,600 weddings a year, according to government statistics. And most people want to spend big money to get married, according to the Bridal Association of America. It estimates a typical wedding this summer will cost about \$28,850 (U.S.) and that 15 per cent of brides will use a planner or consultant.

With Sweet Beginnings, each franchisee makes an initial investment of \$35,000 (Canadian) to get started. That includes \$15,000 worth of material such as the display items and the catalogues. Franchisees receive five days of training in Vancouver, where Sweet Beginnings is based, and get an additional three or four days of training in the local market. Sweet Beginnings has 16 locations in Canada and two in the United States.

To plan a wedding for 100 people, depending on the intricacy of the decorations and the planning, Ms. Dieterich would charge somewhere between \$1,000 and \$1,500. She has also done larger and more elaborate events where she charges \$7,000 to \$9,000. She does most of the work herself but can call upon a casual staff of 10 people, mostly students, to assist during busy weekends.

Alberta's economic prosperity has helped her, Ms. Dieterich says, but more important initially was her aggressive marketing. Once that took hold and she acquired clients, she expanded on her good reputation.

A sense of style is useful in the job, Ms. Dieterich says, but common sense is more essential. "You do have to have a good head on your shoulders," she says.

Despite a job that consumes most of her weekends, Ms. Dieterich says her family life does not suffer. She has a three-year-old son, Conrad, and spends as much of her weekday time with him as she can. The family schedules vacations around slow periods in the business.

But there are few of those on the horizon for Ms. Dieterich, who remains as enthralled by weddings as ever.

"I'm an only child," she says, "so because I don't have a large family, I like getting out there and meeting people. In this business you see all different sorts of people, and it's just so neat to see all the personalities that come in. I haven't had a bride come to me that I haven't liked."