



Cannon says her Sacred Season ornaments (on display in her Belmar, N.J., home) "remind people how much they have to be grateful for."

Branching Out

Homelessness couldn't keep Mary Margaret Cannon from creating a popular line of Christmas ornaments

For most residents, the biggest hurdle in renewing a New York driver's license is a long line. For Mary Margaret Cannon, a 1999 trip to the Haverstraw Department of Motor Vehicles challenged her very identity. When she stepped up with a form displaying a P.O. box instead of a street address, "the woman said, 'You don't live in a box! Where do

you live?'" recalls Cannon, who, after the demise of a business and her marriage, had no place to live. "I told her, 'I'm homeless right now. Sometimes I sleep in my car.' Everyone in line was looking at me."

These days Cannon, 47, once again has a home of her own, thanks to the people lining up to buy her Christmas tree ornaments. The col-

lection, called Sacred Season, was started by Cannon while living with friends. It features hand-painted glass ornaments imbued with biblical significance—such as an egg depicting a boat in rough waters called "Jesus Calms the Stormy Sea." The collection (24 eggs that retail for \$25 each, and six globes priced at \$50 apiece) has decorated TV shows, including *Friends*, and is sold at New York's Saks Fifth Avenue, Fortunoff and specialty stores nationwide.

Cannon's creative vision was precise. Coming up with the concepts for each piece and employing area artists to execute them, "I wanted to use subtle designs that would remind people of the Gospels' message of

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peace, joy, hope and forgiveness," she says. It also proved precisely suited to our times. "Right now people need to reach out to their spiritual connection," says Fortunoff spokeswoman Arlene Putterman. "It makes the ornaments more meaningful." And, adds Saks buyer Amy Schibell, "the colors are gorgeous. I found their simplicity beautiful."

The oldest of three daughters born to Joseph, a Washington, D.C., attorney (now deceased), and homemaker Marjorie, 87, Cannon attended Georgetown University, where she majored in philosophy. Severe back problems forced her to leave school just six credits shy of her diploma. In 1977 she landed a job with the U.S. Department of Energy, which led to a post as an assistant in the White House under President Carter. "I love watching *The West Wing* because I feel like I'm jumping right back," she says. In 1980 she met her future husband, a health-care administrator. Cannon moved to Nyack, N.Y., with him; they married in 1992 and, at



Cannon spent many homeless nights in her minivan.

his suggestion, she developed a business selling Christmas wares.

The couple, however, divorced in 1995, a year before Cannon launched Sacred Season. Then, in 1998, even as business began to pick up, Cannon's sole investor backed out. Around that time she lost her house in the divorce. With no place to go, she slept in her showroom and her minivan. Despite her résumé, Cannon couldn't find work. "It was shocking to me," she says, "that I couldn't be a checkout girl in a grocery store because I couldn't

pass the credit check."

Over the next two years Cannon stayed with friends and even spent six months in a convent in Brooklyn—all the while determined to resurrect Sacred Season. She managed to find an investor in June 2000 and that month rented a one-bedroom apartment with an ocean view in Belmar, N.J. "From the moment I moved in," she says, "it was like peace washing over me."

Today, with projected 2001-02 sales of \$2 million, Cannon has a small group of investors and plans to expand her line to include 115 more designs as well as greeting cards and gift wrap—success that, for Cannon, means her optimism paid off. "There are two ways to look at that glass," she says. "Is it half full or half empty? I look at it and say, 'I can quench my thirst with this.'"

- Sophitronia Scott
- Jennifer Wren in Belmar



"Mary has a vision," says her friend Brent Robertson (visiting Cannon with wife Ute Van Sitteren and baby Zoé), who took Cannon in.



For more on Sacred Season Ornaments, go to www.people.com or AOL (Keyword: People)