

CHF Success Story: Lea Tran

How does a 17-year Medicinal Research Chemist make the leap to owning her own custom window treatment company?

“Keep investing in your knowledge and take one step at a time” says Lekhanh (Lea) Tran, owner of Distinctive Designs.

1. How did you get started?

I grew up learning how to design, draft patterns and fabricate apparel in my early teenage years in Viet Nam. Although sewing was my childhood passion and I was excellent at it, I never considered doing it for a living. Instead, I attended college and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Chemistry from Villanova University. I spent 17 years working as a Medicinal Chemist for internationally known pharmaceutical companies starting at Wyeth and then Merck.

Despite my love for science, I often dreamed of having my own business. I wasn't sure what I would be good at, but I did know that I loved to create beautiful things with fabrics and trims. In October 2003, as a birthday treat for myself, I bought a high-end Viking 1+ sewing machine on ebay. My plan was to dress up the windows in my house. I needed more education so I searched the internet for an advanced window treatment fabrication class and found the CHF School in Swannanoa, NC. I was happy to find that a school existed that offered a great source of education combined with hands-on experience for learning how to create window treatments. I was hesitant to sign up at first so I put the idea on the back burner. I did go ahead with completing the window treatments in my house and I received many compliments on them. Unfortunately, they didn't live up to my expectation of industry standards or give me the professional look I had wanted. My curiosity about the CHF Academy continued to grow.

In spring 2004, I attended my first International Window Covering Expo in Maryland and I had the opportunity to meet Cheryl Strickland (the founder of CHF School). That was where I got my first taste of the excitement that the industry has to offer. I decided then that education at the Academy would be well worth the investment and might open a new door to an entrepreneur opportunity doing what I absolutely love.

With encouragement from my sister Amy, church friend, Pat, and my neighbor, Diane, I decided to test out a home-based business creating beautiful custom window treatments part time while still working at Merck. After one year of successful operation, I happily volunteered to be laid off from Merck to pursue my dream of becoming a window fashion designer and fabricator. To enhance my knowledge of professional window treatments and interior design in general, I also completed The Interior Design Certification Program at Temple University.



2. Please describe your business and the service you offer.

Distinctive Designs offers a full range of window treatment services. We do everything from dressing up a bare window with hard treatments like blinds, shades, shutters and then layering them with beautiful fabric drapes, valances or cornice boards. To really bring the whole look of a room together I love to accessorize spaces with pillows, cushions and other creative soft furnishings. I am one of the few designers in my area to offer computer rendered designs of treatments on an actual photo of the client's window. This gives them a really good idea about what the final product will look like. Distinctive Designs has grown largely by word of mouth. It is gratifying to know that my clients are enjoying my designs and creations from the last few years. I have also built a tight-knit network with some very creative designers that I work with. I enjoy the growing friendships and partnerships with them.

3. How did your experience at the Custom Home Furnishings Academy help to make your business successful?

I have to say CHF Academy was the foundation of my confidence when I first started the business. Just knowing that there is a professional work force with rich resources and talented teachers always there to help with any question really helped to build my self-esteem.

My first class was Window Treatment 301 with Donna Skufis at CHF School in the summer 2004 and it was fascinating. She has a wealth of knowledge and yet she is so humble and friendly. I met other experienced fabricators in class and we just loved every minute of learning. The class was intense but no one wanted to leave the workroom at the end of the day because it was addicting. We all left with actual top treatment samples to bring home for show and tell. I came back a few months later to take Window Treatment 401 with Susan Schurz and learned lots of beautiful high-end drapery designs and intricate hand sewing techniques. Susan is super skillful with the details and I enjoyed her sweet and elegant southern charm. More beautiful samples were brought home for display in the workroom and I earned my Advanced Window Coverings Certification.

I recently completed Window Treatment 501 and Draping Drafting Window Treatments at CHF Academy. Of course, I always managed to sell the newest fabrication styles that I learned from school with each class I took. The school is a wonderful source of inspiration for new trends, tricks and techniques to save time and make the challenge more approachable.

4. Describe your workroom. What are some of your favorite tools or features of your workroom?

Luckily, I have a decent size finished basement roughly 500 square feet that my husband, Duc Tran, converted to a pleasant fabrication studio for me. I am blessed with a handy husband and with the help of his brother, Loc Tran, I have a 5'x14' and a 4'x 9' workroom padded tables with capability of 18" extension on the sides. My brother-in-law put a lot of thought into building the tables. He put them on wheels and added side drawers, a ruler drawer and fabric storage under the tables. He also created a sliding fabric rack for my linings and movable rack units for storing my finished board mount treatments on a large side wall.

The latest addition to my workroom was a wall of composite board for swag draping. In my workroom, I also have two Juki straight stitch machines, one Juki serger, one blind hem, a Viking embroidery machine, and a home serger machine. I love everything in my workroom, but if I have to pick, the tables are my favorite things. My fabrication studio is my sanctuary from the outside world on days when I am not doing administrative work in the office, which is on the first level of our home next to the foyer.





My design studio space is about 10' x 13' and that's where I do computer work or meet with clients. In the office I also have three full shelves of fabrics sample books, hardware samples, trims and samples of hard treatments, and a variety of shades and blinds to show to clients. My office is another one of my favorite spaces when I want to take a break away from the workroom.

5. What are some of the popular things you sell? Do you have an interesting project that you would like to tell us about?

I started out with just soft treatments but thanks to my husband's help being my installer, he walks me through what is necessary to understand the hard treatment business. We now carry and sell the full line of Hunter Douglas products and many other brand names of hard treatments. We provide excellent personal service and generate lots of repeat clients. I also consult and design challenging, interesting window treatments. Behind the scene, almost all projects have their own set of unique challenge and fun element. You can check out my website www.distinctivedesignsbytran.com for a close look at pictures of some completed projects.

6. Have you overcome any challenges in your business that you like to share?

I credit most of my accomplishments to my loving husband, Duc Tran, He works tirelessly to support me and he is the backbone of Distinctive Designs' success. In addition to being my installer, Duc is also the cornice board constructor. He is well known to all of my clients, gaining their trust with his patience and the high quality of his work. Without him, it would be impossible for me to be at this point in my business.

Like many other small business owners with no business background, and no one to delegate the day-to-day tasks to, I wear many hats in my business. Beside the core job of sales and fabricating, I also do my own bookkeeping and I keep both the workroom and office organized. Some days it's difficult to stay focused when so many things all need attention at the same time.

This past year, I decided to hire a network associate to help launch my website, giving potential clients the opportunity to view my work in their own time and in the comfort of their own homes. I also have a bookkeeper to help out twice a year. It's a great feeling to have people who can take a load or two off of my shoulders so I can concentrate on the sales, designs and creative front.

7. Do you belong to any professional group or organizations?

Of course I belong to the CHF Academy Magazine and forum. The second important organization I belong to is WCAA (Window Covering America Association). I have learned a great deal from these window professional groups. I attend the International Window Covering Expo and CHF Conferences to be inspired by the new trends, products and technologies. Recently, I have joined a few other local business network groups including the eWomen Network and the Women's Referral Network. I am also a member of the Perkiomen Valley Chamber of Commerce.

8. What are your goals for the future?

One of my many goals for the future is to hire additional employees or partner up with some other talented fabricator so that I have more time to focus on expanding the sales and design part of my business. I also hope to generate more revenue using the Internet. Using e-mail and the Internet to communicate with clients will be an invaluable tool and my goal for this year is to make the most of this. My biggest goal is to be able to spend more time with my family, especially my son, Alexander, who is approaching High School.

9. What piece of advice would you give to someone starting a workroom?

My advice to anyone starting out would be to embrace the power of knowledge in your field. Build confidence through professional education. The CHF Academy is an excellent place that will help you achieve your dream and give you the necessary tools. Join network associations. Invest in books, classes, webinars, and the many technologies that are available to help you in your business. Always keep your eyes open for new opportunity and most important of all, HAVE FUN!

