

# BUSINESS

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Photo/RACHELLE A. OMENSON

Behind John and Margaret Erving is all the original artwork for their greeting-card designs. In May, the Willingboro couple began their own business, JonMar Creations, which designs, manufactures and publishes its own African American greeting cards. "It's going to be a business we'll be able to share in," Mr. Erving said.

## For couple, business is in the cards

Will cater to African Americans

By Marques Harper  
BCT staff writer

Over the past year, John and Margaret Erving have combined past work experiences, long hours and artistic talent to turn their dream into a working reality.

With assistance from SCORE (Service Core of Retired Executives) and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, the Willingboro couple are ready to take on a risky venture — starting their own business.

In May, they balanced their full-time jobs while launching JonMar Creations, company that manufactures and publishes African American greeting cards.

"I had a foundation in greeting cards. Plus, we were looking for something we could do together," said Mr. Erving, who worked for American Greetings for two years and is currently a customer service representative for Alliant Food Service (formerly Kraft Food Service) in Philadelphia.

Mr. Erving, wanting to change directions from his regular job and too young to retire, considered everything from recycling to desktop publishing. It was Mrs. Erving who suggested they start a greeting-card company after learning her husband's interest in the industry.

"You can buy cards with flowers and animals, but a lot of people want to see their own faces," said Mrs. Erving, a quality control specialist for the federal government. "That is something the stores are going to have to address more and more, not only for black people, but for Hispanics and Asians and all of the different cultures."

The Ervings' company, however, isn't the first to sell greeting cards that target the black community. In 1987, Hallmark introduced its own line of African American greeting cards and several other major card chains followed its lead.

"They already have their accounts set up. We feel that we have fresh designs and fresh verses," Mr. Erving said. "Also, we will target markets that they aren't in. I don't look at their markets as my markets.

"There is an alternative market. Even though the big three (Hallmark, American Greetings and Gibson) have the bulk of the business, we're not particularly after that market itself," he said.

Independently owned black greeting-cards companies have been equally successful in selling African American cards as national chains, said Mr. Erving, citing one company that grossed more than \$1 million in sales last year.

To build a substantial clientele, the Ervings, who run their business from their Thornhill Lane home, plan to market their greeting cards via independent sales representatives throughout the country. After distributing 80 packages of greeting cards, they have generated definite interest in their line.

With potential buyers in the works across the country, Mr. Erving believes a majority of the company's initial success will come from trade shows, sales representatives and church fund-raisers. As its national market grows, the company is also hoping to feature its cards in local, independent food stores, drugstores and card shops.

Working from their kitchen, the Ervings have created an initial line of 24 cards that includes general birthday, thank you, sympathy and their own "Yearly card."

The concept of the Yearly card, which the Ervings have copyrighted, is an annual greeting sent to old friends and others. The idea is to reach out to people once a year, much like at Christmastime.

The card features part of the company's logo, Little Woolly, a baby lamb, for which Mrs. Erving has composed an accompanying story.

While Mr. Erving designed artwork for nine cards in their line, Mrs. Erving wrote the verses.

The Ervings plan to expand their line to include posters, prints and a stuffed animal based on the company logo. But their next step is to develop a Christmas, Kwanzaa and New Year's collection.

"It's going to be a business we'll be able to share in. Sometimes you have to take some risks to realize the rewards and the profits," Mr. Erving said.