

It starts out as a shabby den with a dated sofa, worn coffee table and miniblinds covering the windows. But with a little help from Melissa McIntosh and her interior design company, Minc., it can become a serene retreat filled with the trendiest furniture, lavish draperies and maybe even a faux finish wall treatment to boot. Minc., which opened in 2005, is bringing "big-city design" to Fayetteville. "A lot of people think I have a degree in decorating, but that's not true," McIntosh said. "I can do that, but I can also do so much more."

During her studies at Meredith College, McIntosh learned about designing residential and commercial spaces and making them not only enjoyable but functional. She used her skills designing spaces in Raleigh and Charlotte before returning to Cumberland County. Today, she is so busy that an appointment is needed to catch her in the office. "We do a lot of commercial and hospitality spaces," McIntosh said. "I like to completely transform a space."

Her list of clients is long and varied. She's provided Cape Fear Valley Medical Center with speciality chairs, New Century Bank with artwork and accessories, and, most recently, completed a redesign of the Fort Bragg Officer's Club and a nightclub at Fort Jackson, S.C.

At Fort Jackson, "We did color-change LEDs and hung silk panels so there was shadow dancing," McIntosh said. "It was really neat." The military is the largest of Minc's 250-plus customers. Because of proximity, Fort Bragg was the obvious niche for the small company, which McIntosh started at age 25. "I think being young gives us an advantage," she said. "We know what's trendy, what's up and coming. We can make things as traditional as you like or as fun and upscale New York as you like." McIntosh's love for design started when she was a child sketching home layouts on large pads of paper. "I would ask my parents to get me floor-plan books for birthdays or Christmas," she said. "I was doing elaborate drawings for an 8-year-old." In college, she moved on to designing family members' homes and her own dorm room, where she built a Tiki hut to correspond with a tropical theme. "Design doesn't have to be stuffy or intimidating," McIntosh said. "We really tailor each job to each customer."

When the company began, McIntosh found herself working about 80 hours a week to get clients, design spaces and implement her plans. Although she was young and full of energy, the workload became overwhelming. "I began wondering, could I physically do this?" she said. The answer was yes, but she had to hire help to keep going. In August, she hired Summer Bethune as a sales executive to concentrate on military needs.

Today, the women work about 60 hours a week. "Now, I go out, measure the space, brainstorm about ideas, then I come back and I'll design a space and pop it

up in 3-D," McIntosh said. "They like to see it." If the customer likes her plan, together they begin looking for furniture for the room. McIntosh sells more than 250 lines of furniture and provides customized draperies and bedding. Most residential clients that come to Minc. are baby boomers with disposable income who want to remain trendy. However, Bethune says, the company can work with budgets of any size, "from \$1,000 to \$75,000." "So far this year we've quoted \$1.5 million, probably closer to \$2 million in projects," McIntosh said.

Within the next year, she hopes to hire another designer and a project manager. "My ultimate goal for the company is to be the No. 1 design firm in the Southeast with three divisions - residential, commercial and hospitality," McIntosh said. "Once we do that, I'll feel like we've really gotten there. We really want to offer the eastern part of North Carolina big-city design for a reasonable cost." Staff writer Melissa Willett can be reached at willettm@fayobserver.com or 486-3574.

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