



In February 2004, Huelsman quit Nortel for good and opened The Rusty Bucket on Salem Street. "When I found this downtown area, I thought 'I've got to do it,'" she says. "The street makes you feel like you've stepped back in time, which applied to my whole concept. We wanted to make The Rusty Bucket look and feel like an old country store. It's that feeling of stepping back in time that people feel really good about. I was trying to recapture some of that."

Not only will you find wood floors and a faux general store replica, but Huelsman also sells appliances replicated to look like those from the 1850s, but outfitted with the latest technology. On one of the "old" stoves, she brews hot cider and bakes cookies throughout the day. "A lot of people who have moved here from the Northeast and Midwest had a lot of these stores and this look," she says. "They come in and say 'I've been looking for this but haven't been able to find it.'"

But cookies and cider don't mean Huelsman no longer has any worries—just those of a different kind. "In the corporate world, there's that stress level of people getting laid off. There's a different kind of stress when you work for yourself," Huelsman says. "You lay awake at night and wonder if you're going to be able to pay the bills. The thing about retail is you come to work every day and wait for people to show up, and that can be frustrating because you don't have much control over it. But the gratification you get from owning something yourself and seeing people embrace it is amazing."

Huelsman has been creative when it comes to driving traffic to her shop. Not only did The Rusty Bucket decorate two Parade of Home entries this fall, a 1930 Model A Ford is parked at the storefront's curb, creating official nostalgia. Flyers, newsletters, advertising and word-of-mouth are building her customer base as well.

"I've been pleased with the reception we've gotten," Huelsman says. "It's very gratifying to get that reassurance when someone walks in the door and says, 'I love it here; can I move in?'"

THE RUSTY BUCKET

Pam Huelsman, 50, researched her business idea for approximately two years before quitting Nortel and opening The Rusty Bucket less than a year ago in downtown Apex. The rough-hewn storefront, with wood floors salvaged from local tobacco barns, sells Early American and primitive home furnishings.

Prior to becoming her own boss, Huelsman worked for 23 years in sales and marketing at Nortel, but a volatile economy made her increasingly nervous about job security. "You sit there, and you watch the people next to you getting laid off daily. It's a horrible atmosphere to work in," Huelsman said.

Still, it was hard to leave something she knew to take a leap toward the unknown. "You get in these corporate golden handcuffs that you can't get away from because they pay you really well and you have good benefits. But I still had this dream in the back of my mind for what I wanted to do."

As fate would have it, Huelsman did get laid off from Nortel, as did her husband. But instead of opening her store right away, she decided to lease a booth at Magnolia Marketplace in Cary, a home furnishings company that features hundreds of vendors' wares and provides staff so individual vendors don't have to work their booths. At about the same time, she got called back to Nortel to work as a consultant. "That actually worked out perfectly because I was still able to work," she says. "It gave me a chance to test-run some product lines and get my feet wet and also get a following of customers."