



PHIL NOEL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lucie Voves, president of Church Hill Classics, stands in the company's frame assembly room in Monroe. Inc. magazine has named Church Hill Classics one of the fastest-growing independent businesses in the United States. Below, Julia Pulla, of Danbury, cleans the glass on finished diplomas at Church Hill Classics.

# Framing memories

College market keeping Monroe frame company busy

By Susan Silvers  
STAFF WRITER

All Lucie Voves wanted was to find a nice picture of the Dartmouth College campus where she and her husband met so she could decorate their home.

What she wound up with is a business honored by a national magazine as the third-fastest growing consumer products company in the state.

Church Hill Classics, on Pepper Street in Monroe, has blossomed from what she called "a little moonlighting" at her Newtown home to a company that employs more than 50 people who use the latest equipment to

## CHURCH HILL CLASSICS

**LOCATION:** Monroe  
**PRESIDENT:** Lucie Voves  
**SALES:** \$6.1 million in 2008

turn out customized frames for diplomas, departmental and athletic awards, certifications and special-occasion photographs.

Its partners include colleges, the military, fraternities and sororities, and professional organizations.

Inc. Magazine also ranked Church Hill, See **FRAME** on B3



# Frame business make moves with colleges, organizations

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known online as diploma-frame.com, 190th nationally in consumer products and rated it 4,243rd on the magazine's overall list of the 5,000 fastest-growing independent businesses.

It will be recognized when the magazine honors winners later this month in Washington, D.C.

"It's really a nice reassurance, a pat on the back to be recognized as a company experiencing growth during tough economic times," Voves said. And, she added, "It makes employees feel good about the company they work for."

All this developed because Voves wanted a nice image of Dartmouth Hall, the centerpiece of that college's campus. Back then, in 1991, Voves couldn't find one and commissioned her own painting. She decided to print 500 lithographs, figuring they could be sold to other proud alumni, and learned to frame them as well. Eventually, after selling on the street corner she moved to the alumni magazine and the school's bookstore. She followed with a print of Baker Library, another hit.

Then got she requests from alumni who wanted to frame their diplomas to match.

Because the diplomas were

in Latin, and the name of the school might not be readily recognizable to someone spotting it on a wall, Voves made a deal where she could copy the seal and its name in English, framing it in the school's forest green.

She expanded to similar programs for other colleges whose degrees were in Latin before linking with the University of Connecticut several years later.

In an interview in her Monroe office, Voves pointed out that not just any company can offer what hers does.

"We have to be licensed to reproduce the school seal," she said, adding that having the proper equipment is essential.

The company uses archival-quality materials to properly preserve the cherished documents and has made a specialty of using matting in the organization's special colors.

Voves said that in recent years, practices such as laminating have grown less popular and that framing gives a customer an option to change styles later.

She said her company typically works out a number of selected frame styles with institutions that are usually offered through bookstores. But it also offers customized online framing, seals not usual-

ly available, which has found a growing market for such documents as high school diplomas.

Some styles include places for including souvenirs such as tassels. Others include photographs or spaces for them.

Most frames cost from \$100 to \$200, depending on materials and size, and Voves said the typical ones sell for \$140 to \$150. They are shipped in innovative packaging that is protective yet curbside recyclable.

Frank Johnson, president of the Manufacturing Alliance of Connecticut, said Voves' achievement — a 41 percent growth over the four years — is impressive. "These days to survive is to be doing well," he said.

How did she come to use the name Church Hill? "I wanted a name that sounded like an art gallery," Voves explained. "I thought Church Hill Road was really cute." The "diplomaframe" came from the company's early entry into the Web game and as a good description for its core business.

In recent years, the company has expanded into such accessories as desk boxes, pen stands and paperweights, with wood that matches the frames, many with special insignias. Unlike the frames, which are

constructed in Monroe, the accessories are imported, though some assembly is done here.

With all the potential combinations and variety of products, "we have over 20,000 items that we offer," Voves said.

Despite achieving what at least initially was such uncharted success, Voves was by no means a business novice. After college, where she majored in art history and English, she became a brand manager with Procter & Gamble, overseeing such lines as Noxzema and Fixodent. She moved here shortly after Procter & Gamble bought Richardson-Vicks.

Indeed, she said she'd always had a bit of an entrepreneurial streak, importing African jewelry for sale to museums and setting up a custom photography company for such events as fraternity parties when she was in college.

"It's always kind of been in my blood, I guess," she said.

Voves, who now lives in Ridgefield with her husband and four children, worked out of her house until 1998, when Church Hill leased space in Danbury. It had only 9,000 square feet there when it bought its 47,000-square-foot Monroe building two years

ago.

With its Monroe location between Danbury and Bridgeport, Voves said the company has easily been able to find employees for its needs that include such positions as office staff, Web designers and production workers.

"It's been a big advantage, she said.

Customers insert their diplomas, certificates, photographs or even such mementos as tassels themselves through the removable back of the frames, which also

have a special system for leveling them and mounting them on a wall.

Voves's husband, Joseph, who is now her vice president, said things have become tougher in the current economy, without the staggering growth the company has enjoyed in recent boom times. Still, there's plenty of opportunity to expand.

Already linked to more than 1,000 colleges and universities, the company hopes

to win many more among the 3,800 two- and four-year schools nationwide. Voves said her company also is finding success with professional associations. It hopes as well to expand its line of accessories that match the frames. The company has also done some contract manufacturing for other firms that retail specialized mementos.

"It gives us a lot of latitude to expand in a lot of directions," Voves said.