



Whitney Kidder-Alvarez/Connecticut Post

Workers at diploma frame company Church Hill Classics in Monroe gear up for their busy season. Below, owner Lucie Voves checks out one of the company's frames, which are made at the Pepper Street site.

## FROM BASEMENT TO BIG TIME

Church Hill Classics markets to graduates' proud parents

By PAM DAWKINS  
pdawkins@ctpost.com

MONROE — It was the early 1990s and Lucie Voves wanted a picture to remember her alma mater by.

Voves had been a brand manager with Procter & Gamble; she moved to Connecticut from Cincinnati when P&G acquired the parent of Vicks and Oil of Olay. But when P&G eventually moved the Vicks brand back to Ohio, she stayed with her husband, Joe, who worked in a partly family owned business here.

She worked for a short time at Black & Decker, but thought that if she wanted a picture of Dartmouth College, other alumni might, too.

So she hired an artist to draw a lithograph of a college building; she sold the signed products on the streets and then in a small shop. The store didn't last, but the artist's wife had in the meantime showed her how to frame the lithographs.

Customers liked the frames, and Voves added diploma framing to the selling of lithographs. Another addition came when customers complained their diplomas, printed in Latin, were unreadable; she began printing the name of the school and seal on the mat.

"It was just sort of my gut instinct," Voves, an art history and English major, said of her business idea.

By 1994, Voves had expanded, first to other Ivy League schools, then to the larger Northeastern colleges and universities, including the University of Connecticut.

In 2006, Church Hill Classics had revenues of \$5.2 million, according to *Inc.* magazine, which in August named it



one of the 5,000 fastest-growing private companies — it was No. 2,991 — in the country. Her husband, Joe, oversees the sales, customer service and human resource departments. Robin Schultz, who joined the company 14 years ago — when it was still in Voves' Newtown basement — is in charge of production.

While individual customers can, and do, place orders to have one diploma framed, most of that business comes in bulk through the university's bookstores.

Today, Voves has completed a move from Danbury to Monroe — which marked their change from a company that rents space to one that owns it.

"We were very impressed," Monroe First Selectman Andrew Nunn said of Voves and Church Hill Classics. They first met around late spring, when Voves showed interest in moving to town. Nunn said he set up a meeting with staffers from the tax assessor, zoning and other departments.

This, he said, is what he does for all businesses that show an interest in Monroe. While the majority of the community will always be residential, Nunn said, its location between Interstates 95 and 84 and proximity to Route 25, as

well as its relatively inexpensive costs compared to other parts of the state, makes it attractive to businesses.

"The majority of the interest that we're having is Connecticut companies that are looking to stay in the area," Nunn said. "They [Church Hill] are a nice Connecticut success story ... I think that there's good potential for expansion for them."

"We were only down, production-wise, for about three days," Voves said of the September move to the 47,000-square-foot, two-story Pepper Street building.

That's good, because this is when her company starts to get busy; it mails school-specific brochures to the parents of seniors around this time, to catch students on Thanksgiving break.

"It's usually the parents," who buy the frames and other products, she said.

Church Hill Classics — its Web site is [www.diplomaframe.com](http://www.diplomaframe.com) — now works with more than 700 colleges and universities, as well as companies such as the Danbury Mint, which, despite its name, is based in Norwalk.

For Danbury Mint, the company frames collectable postage stamps and pieces of art. "We do Betty Boop for them," Voves said.

An in-house marketing department creates the school brochures, which showcase the variety of products in the company's repertoire. Costs range from \$24 for a paperweight to \$54 for a desk set; diploma frames start at more than \$100.

Church Hill works with a firm that



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Joe Voves holds up a custom-made diploma frame for his wife, Lucie, in Church Hill Classics' new site in Monroe. Below, the aptly named Matt Price cuts out the mats that are part of the company's finished product.

## Diploma frame company finding room for growth

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acts as centralized management for 26 independent sales contractors across the country, Joe Voves said. These people, who also represent other college-targeted lines, call on the school bookstores.

"They're trusted and have relationships with buyers," he said.

Employees create the frames out of furniture-grade wood shipped in the style of moldings. Rooms offer places to cut glass, Plexiglas and mats, store unused mattes for future orders and assemble the finished products.

The cavernous rooms of the Pepper Street building leave plenty of room for growth, as does the 9.3-acre lot, but have also let them streamline their processes.

"It's much more efficient," Joe Voves said.

"We were very disjointed," Lucie Voves said, and had to use whatever space was available, whether or not it made the most sense from a production perspective.

Church Hill is also introducing a new frame-hanging system Lu-



cie Voves said will probably also be sold on its own.

The product — Level-Lock — even comes with its own small level, so customers can be sure a frame is straight.

Not only does the new site give them room to grow but, "We're having better luck recruiting people," because the company can draw from Bridgeport and Dan-

bury, Lucie Voves said.

That should come in handy, because the next growth step will be to add a second shift, she said.

"I take a lot of satisfaction in being able to provide good jobs to people ..."

*Pam Dawkins, YourMoney editor, can be reached at 330-6351 or by e-mail at [pdawkins@ctpost.com](mailto:pdawkins@ctpost.com).*