



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK SANDLIN

"I wanted to stay in Athens after we graduated," Callie says. "Other than the beach, I would not live anywhere else. It is such a beautiful campus and a great town."

Delivering The Goods

This Athens entrepreneur found her niche creating gift baskets.



Country ham, stone-ground grits, buttermilk biscuit mix, peach preserves, and Jittery Joe's Coffee. Callie Waller checks off her list as she places each item into an attractive basket. Adding two Christmas mugs, she looks up and smiles approvingly; another one done.

The University of Georgia alumna offers gift baskets and other care packages through her cottage company called Bulldog Baskets. For nine years, she has delivered a little happiness to the Athens area through her home-based business.

Callie creates the baskets using specialty items you will not find in a typical grocery store. "I started out by offering only made-in-Georgia products," Callie explains. "Then I expanded to include items from all over the South. Now I buy some things that are not from our region, because I need the variety. But it's still all gourmet goods—not your typical stuff."

Opportunity Knocks

Being her own boss suits Callie's personality. Bubbly, energetic, and highly resourceful, she felt squeezed creatively when working at a traditional job. "At most offices, your ideas, no matter how good they are, have to fall in line with everybody else's and compete for priority or attention," Callie says. "For somebody like me, it was paralyzing."

Her mom's generosity indirectly



Callie named Mama Nelle's Breakfast Basket after her grandmother's older sister, who was known for her biscuits.

nudged Callie toward her business venture. She sent her daughter gift packages throughout her college years, continuing even after Callie married and stayed in Athens to work. "Student workers in the office would see them and say, 'Gee, that is so cool. I wish my mom would do that for me.' I thought, 'You know, this would be a good little business,'" Callie explains.

She began her company by mailing a simple brochure. A decade and a 10-page catalog later, Bulldog Baskets continues to thrive and grow. "We've been really lucky," Callie says. "It has been a wonderful thing."

Lucky Recipients

Callie initiated her care packages to ease homesickness for incoming freshmen. Then she expanded her focus to include gift baskets as a comforting balm during midterm and final exams and to celebrate birthdays and holidays. ▶



Callie hand-delivers gift baskets in Athens and Winder, but she will ship them anywhere.

Callie tapped into another market by approaching local businesses—clients who drive up sales considerably during the holiday season. A few years ago, she added summer packages for children who attend Y camps in Athens. “These gift baskets target a whole different age group,” she says.

By far, though, the busiest single event every year for Bulldog Baskets remains sorority bid day—when young women receive their invitations to join. Family members and friends send congratulatory gift baskets (or in some cases, consolation packages). “Greek is big here,” Callie says. “It’s a huge night for us.”

Because she single-handedly operates the company, Callie relies heavily on husband Paul, other family members, and friends to help during crunch times. Over the years, she has fine-tuned a system for handling large orders. Paul mans the phones while Callie and friends assemble the packages.

“On bid night, I call my friends over to help,” she says. “I have a big girls’-night party to thank everyone who helps me.”

All in the Family

The mother of three (ages 1 to 6) appreciates the benefits of owning her own company. “What I love about this is that it has given me some control over our family life,” she says. “I am home when my old-

est daughter gets off the bus. There are no after-school arrangements to deal with.”

Callie’s working at home complements Paul’s schedule as a state trooper. “Sometimes he leaves at 3 p.m. and doesn’t get home until midnight,” Callie says. “If I worked 8 to 5, he wouldn’t be able to see the kids or spend time with me.”

Sweet Success

Business ebbs and flows with the calendar, allowing Callie time to pursue other activities. She sings in a choir, does volunteer work, and constantly looks for new products to add to her basket-filling inventory.

“Most days, I love what I do,” Callie says. “I love the challenge. It’s the only thing in my whole life that I’ve ever done that I’ve felt challenged by—well, short of being a parent.”

SARA ASKEW JONES

Bulldog Baskets: www.bulldogbaskets.com, (706) 549-1113, or 1-800-419-8983. Basket prices range from \$27.95 to \$99.95.

The Best Of Bulldog Baskets

Callie offers a wide variety of gift and care packages. Here are two customer favorites.

■ **Basic Care Package:** Bulldog Bits Chocolate Chip Cookies, Saralyn’s Shortbread Peanut Butter Crunch Cookies, Very Cherry Jelly Belly Candies, Big Steer Snack Mix, and gourmet microwave popcorn (\$27.95)

■ **Family “Knight” Basket:** Peppermint Snaps, Harvest Chips and Salsa, Dillon Candies Pecan Logs, Bulldog Bits Chocolate Chip Cookies, Warthen Cheese Biscuits, holiday napkins, a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, and more (\$89.95)