

Transcript with Sherrie Aght on Etsy

Brittany: Hey everyone, Brittany Lynch here.

Today I have a very special guest with me that I am really excited about interviewing, Sherrie Aght. I first discovered Sherrie when I was browsing through Etsy, the marketplace for crafts and homemade items. I fell in love with the signs that Sherrie makes.

After learning more about Sherrie by reading her Etsy 'About' page, I knew that I had to have her on to speak with her about how she transitioned out of her Computer Science degree into doing what she loves full time.

So, with that said, Sherrie are you there?

[00:00:25] Sherrie: Yes, I am here. Hi.

Brittany: Hi. How are you?

Sherrie: I'm doing great. How are you?

Brittany: I'm doing pretty good. I'm so happy to have you here today. I just want to start by asking, or getting you to tell me a little bit about your background, about how you transitioned from that Computer Science degree into what you originally thought you could never make a career and doing what you love.

Sherrie: OK, you are asking how that transition happened?

Brittany: Yeah, that's exactly right. How did you leave your former profession and decide, 'This isn't what I want to do,' and decide to get on selling on Etsy?

[00:01:04] Sherrie: Well, I was working in the computer field for several years, and doing web development, and online graphics, and things like that. I just always really loved the art side of things, but I was kind of stuck on the technological side. The older I got, the more younger people kept coming into the field that had just gotten out of college and they are bright and enthusiastic and

go-getters. They'd learned all the latest technology, and I just found that, because it wasn't really my forte - it was where I ended up but I don't think that I really excelled particularly in that; I would have been better on the art side. So, these new people would come in and be able to run laps around me. Something that might take me a couple weeks to get done, to get it perfect, these young guys out of college could have it done in a couple of days.

Brittany: Yeah.

Sherrie: I didn't want to keep up with my skills, and I wanted to do different things. So, I actually just kind of took early retirement, and was planning on being at home in the country, and just doing what I wanted to do. By doing that, I started making jewelry and selling baby bracelets and things at craft fairs. It just kind of evolved into my sign business. There are several different steps to get me there, and I can tell you about those.

[00:02:51] Brittany: Yeah, that's really interesting. I just think it's so cool. There's one thing that you said on your profile, "I guess it started when I got to paint at the easel in kindergarten. Little did I know I'd found my lifelong love. I just got temporarily got distracted planning my life by the fact that I cannot draw well."

I think that's so cool. This is something that you are passionate about, but you just never really thought, 'Well, I could turn it into a business.' Was that surprising to you when you first started selling things doing something you actually loved?

Sherrie: Absolutely. Because I had been retired, basically, and didn't want.... I've always done crafts. Since I was little. Any type of craft, I know how to do. From knitting, to crocheting, to decopatch - just anything that comes out, I want to know how to do it, and spend all of my spare time doing something creative. So, I was retired, so, of course, that's what I did, started creating things. People kept saying, 'You ought to sell those, you ought to sell those.' And I thought, 'Well, I could give it a try.'

So, I started out at craft shows, like I said, doing the jewelry and baby bracelets. Then I got into my first shop, a local store in Cameron, MO called [Iron Horse](#). They do a lot of primitives. So I started making signs. That went real well. Then we started making furniture, and that went really well. When I added the signs online, it just kind of took over. We didn't have time for anything else. So, I pulled out of the local shops and quit making furniture and I do signs.

[00:04:49] Brittany: Exclusively signs now.

Sherrie: Right, exactly.

Brittany: That's so neat. How did you hear about Etsy in the first place?

Sherrie: Gosh, I don't know. I've known about it for so long. I started my shop in 2008 with baby bracelets. I switched it over to my sign shop in little over a year now. January of 2012 is when I actually started selling signs.

Brittany: Each one of your creations is handmade by you. How long does it take to make each one of your signs, and what do you do to maximize your hours-per-dollar?

Sherrie: I kind of do everything in an assembly line-type fashion. I write down all of my orders, I build all of my signs at one time. I go out in my shed, I cut all the wood, and I put it all together. So, I'll make 20 or 30 signs at a time. I put them all together and then I stain them all. Then, the next step is I paint all of them in whatever their background color is going to be. (Then I) put the tags on the back that say the customer's name and what sign they want. Then, I go upstairs - I live in a little log cabin...

Brittany: Oh cool...

Sherrie: ...in the middle of the woods. I have a loft; that's my workspace. I do all of the painting in the kitchen. I cover up the counters with old wallpaper and paint the signs. Then they go up to the loft. I do have a helper, her name is Kim, and she comes a couple of days a week, when things are really busy. We work up in the loft. I've got all of my supplies and everything all set up. So, we've got all of the

signs sitting there, and the order sheet, and (I) just pick up the next one that's on the list and do the painting.

[00:07:04] Brittany: Right, so batching it makes a lot of sense. That's what I do with a lot of my work, too. That makes sense to me. I've got a question, and this is something I've always encouraged people to just, if they have an interest in something, to pursue it and slowly get better at it. I guess my question to you is, what would you say to someone who isn't necessarily good at drawing, painting, or knitting but wants to get creative. What kind of advice would you give to someone who wants to start (being) creative in (his or her) life but doesn't really know how to start?

Sherrie: I would explore classes, definitely. Like I said, community centers, at the local colleges. I would take as many classes as you can find. Michaels has craft classes. Just everything. I'm really, really surprised. I wish that I had some of my original signs that I made, because little did I know how it would evolve.

Brittany: Yeah.

Sherrie: Because I thought they were pretty good back then. And now, when I look at them and critique them, it's just like, oh my God, I can't believe what they started out looking like. And people actually bought them because, you know, now it's funny. My coworker and I will go to different shops and we'll look at the signs and we're like, "Oh my gosh, look at that, look at that." We're very, very critical of people. That's what we do all day. We look at how straight the lines are and how crisp...that kind of thing. A lot of time doing this has really, really improved my skills. Which is surprising...I don't know. That surprises me because I didn't know that would happen.

Brittany: You didn't know that maybe...

[00:09:01] Sherrie: I didn't expect that. A couple of years ago, if I would have taken a fine paintbrush and tried to paint a straight line that curves and not...you know, with the paintbrush, it would have looked like a first grader did it. Now, sometimes, you know, I just kind of whip it out and go, 'Wow, that

looks really good. Oh my gosh.’ I spend a lot of time thanking God, definitely, for, you know, something like that. It’s like, ‘Wow, that worked perfect the first time. Thank you, Lord.’

Brittany: Yeah. I think it’s sometimes like you said. I think that just starting out and starting to try to get better is the most important first step. And the more you do it, the better that you get. It’s what you said early. If you look at the first signs you sold, you would say now, “Wow, how did anyone buy these?” Sometimes you can be your own worst critic, right? You don’t realize the value that you have, that other place on it. That’s why Etsy is so great. You can just make something and put it up there online and see, you know, are people responsive to it or not? I mean, for example, you even started in another category with the baby brackets. But then, as you started to putting things up there, you notice the signs are really starting well, and you kind of evolve from there.

Sherrie: Exactly, yes.

[00:10:19] Brittany: So, I think that, sometimes just choosing something you have an interest in, and then, either through classes, like you said, or go online with YouTube or any of these places, there’s so many opportunities and ways to learn how to pursue a particular craft or passion. And then from there, place it online and just see how it does. With that said, what do you think are some of the more rewarding aspects of your job now? I guess I wouldn’t say you work a ton, but you have more flexible hours, perhaps, with Etsy and selling online. So what would you say are the more rewarding aspects of your job?

Sherrie: Definitely being able to be creative is the No. 1, because it’s just something that I have to do. It’s such an outlet. And it’s rewarding so much when people will write to me and say, “I love your shop. You do such great work.” It’s like, really? It’s so flattering and it’s just awesome to hear that. And definitely being able to work from home and set my own hours. I work crazy hours even though some days I get up, and I have coffee and I go to the gym, run errands. And then, I will start work at one o’clock in the afternoon and I’ll work until 10:30 at night. Other days, I work in the morning, and (then)

I’m free to take off and go buy supplies or visit with my sisters. So, the flexibility and being able to work from home are huge benefits. I love that.

Brittany: That is a really nice aspect. For me, too, I often work more than people would guess, but it doesn’t feel like work to me - sometimes it does, but most of the time it doesn’t feel like work because I love it so much. You can probably relate to that a little, too.

[00:12:17] Sherrie: Absolutely. Yesterday, in fact, I was kind of going through some of my designs and I just kept pulling out more and more, going, ‘I want to do this, I want to do this, I want to do this.’ And there are just not enough hours in the day to do everything that I want to do. I just keep coming up with more ideas and more ideas and ways I want to expand things. I just can’t get it all done.

Brittany: That’s the exciting part. You have a pipeline of things you can continue to pursue and continue to challenge you and get excited about everyday, which is a really, really cool thing that maybe you just didn’t feel in your last job.

Sherrie: Yes, definitely. The idea is to just keep flowing. It’s just an awesome way to make a living. Like you said, it does not feel like I’m working. Even when I sit down at the end of the night in front of the TV, a lot of times I will have my computer on my lap and I’ll be looking for different ideas or working on a design, and watching TV at the same time, which is another great benefit. While I work, I can do whatever I want. I can watch TV – have that going in the background while I work. Or, I’ve listened to Pandora streaming radio. It’s just awesome. I get to do whatever I want and can take breaks when I want and go see my dogs.

[00:13:52] Brittany: Yeah, just more control over your life, right? That’s why I always tell people, ‘Pursue something you actually have an interest or passion in, because when you are starting a business or growing a business, there’s always going to be work involved. Often more than you think. However, if you are pursuing something that you actually enjoy, it doesn’t feel that way. You are able to actually feel excited throughout the day, and you still have that flexibility, like you said, visiting

your sister, or go play with your dog, or listen to loud music, whatever you want. The opportunity is there for you. I think that's so cool.

Sherrie: What came to my mind - Since I am the sign lady, and live with quotes up all around me all the time, that reminded me of a quote that says, 'Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life.'

Brittany: Yes, and I couldn't agree with that more. That's just something that I believe so strongly in and I think that you are a perfect example of that. You left a career that you kind of initially fell into and started doing what you love. Now you've got this amazing sign business. I don't want to put words in your mouth but you probably feel a lot more fulfilled and happy than when you were at your former job.

Sherrie: Absolutely. The really, really interesting thing, I think, is that, when I left the job in the computer field, I made a set amount of money per year. I thought, 'Well, that's the most money I'll have ever made in my life. I will never make more money than what I'm walking away from.' I'm making more money now, by a lot. Which is really, really surprising.

[00:15:38] Brittany: No, that's so cool. What more can you ask for than being in a position where you can do something you love and, not only make money, but make better money than you did when you were doing something that you didn't have a strong passion for or actually feel happy doing? I just think that's so cool. And, with the Internet, there are so many different ways you can do it. Etsy is a really good opportunity for pursuing that.

I think we talked about some of the more rewarding aspects of your job. There's got to be some challenges too. So, what are some of the challenges you face, and how do you overcome those?

Sherrie: I would say the biggest challenge is getting everything done that I want to do. I've grown quite a bit and I sometimes get a little panicked when I have 40 orders to get done, and there's just me. So I have had to look into getting some help. I have a guy that will build the signs for me. I pay him to do that part. Then I do have one girl that will come and she helps me paint the signs a couple of days a

week. I am just beginning to worry about Christmas because last year at Christmas I was completely, totally swamped.

Brittany: I can imagine.

Sherrie: I had two girls helping me at that point. So I need to ramp up and figure out...I need to hire someone to help me part time.

[00:17:16] Brittany: Well, I guess that's a good problem to have, right? More sales than less sales and having to have to figure out how to deal with that?

Sherrie: Absolutely, yes. It is a great problem to have. One thing I would love to mention that I love about Etsy: I have a smartphone and I have the Etsy app on my phone. So, every time I get an order, my phone goes 'cha-ching'. So, every time I get a 'cha-ching', whomever is with me, we always say, "Thank you, Lord!"

Brittany: So happy about hearing that sound everyday, hey?

Sherrie: But sometimes it's a bit of a struggle when you know you've got more than what you can handle. You're sitting there trying to relax or trying to, you know, unwind because you've been working so hard, and your phone goes 'cha-ching'. You're like, 'Thank you, I think.'

Brittany: Yes, more things to figure out. When you reach a certain point, and this happens to a lot of small businesses, you start out by yourself. Then business is going well, and, as you said, you should be very thankful for that. But it reaches a point where you are kind of at that awkward phase where you need to start looking at getting some outside help in order to handle all the orders. That's obviously a good problem to have, but it's definitely a challenge in and of itself, as well.

So, kind of from that perspective, how did you learn to deal with or figure out the number aspects of running a business? When did you know this was actually going to be profitable for you? And how have you dealt with as you're thinking about bringing on extra help?

[00:18:52] Sherrie: Well, I don't have a business degree and never wanted to be a manager or be anybody's boss. So, it's definitely been a learning experience for me. The biggest help that I have is that we have an area in Kansas City that is all these old warehouses where they've opened up shops where they re-purpose things and sell things, where everybody has a booth. So, I started down there, and that's where the learning process really, really helped with the pricing and things. I got input from a lot of different people and saw what they were doing. So, that helped me to price things. Then, when I talked to the manager there, I was telling him that it's getting to where I am too busy, I can't handle all of it. He said, "Well, what you have to do is increase your prices so you can handle the demand." So that was extremely helpful.

Brittany: That's a really good insight; increase your prices so you can start to handle your demand. So now you're making more money per piece, but I am sure your volume is increasing every day. But that extra profit margin must be a huge help, especially when you think about, 'OK, can I afford to hire someone to help me with all of the work that I am getting.

Sherrie: Exactly. I still want very much for the things in my shop to be affordable, so that people who really like them can afford to get one or two, be able to buy what they want. That's just so important to me that it's affordable. But, at the same time, I have to try to balance how much time does this particular sign take. How detailed is it? So sometimes I might have two signs that are the same size, like great big, where one might have three great big words on it, and the other one might have, you know, 400 tiny words. The more detail, it's going to be more expensive because it just takes a lot longer.

Brittany: More time.

[00:21:12] Sherrie: I just try to price things really fair.

Brittany: That sounds like a really good approach. Obviously it's working well for you. That's the most important thing.

I'm really curious. How does your lifestyle compare today to when you were employed full time? I know I asked this earlier, but are you happier now, more fulfilled? Do you enjoy more of the things that make you happy now versus when you were working for another company?

Sherrie: Absolutely. I was driving home the other day. I had just kind of run some errands and was maybe picking up supplies and getting ready to get back home and get to work. The thought went through my head as I was driving home to go to work that, and it was a beautiful day and everything, and I just thought, 'I really love this life. This is great. I am doing what I want to do, and it is very fulfilling.'

Brittany: Yeah.

Sherrie: And definitely happier. I remember I had a hour commute to work. I remember in the mornings just dragging, you know, and dreading being there, and watching the clock. And it's like, how many more hours? And now I look at the clock and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, so much time went by. I still have so much to do and there's so little time."

Brittany: And that's exactly how you want to be feeling. You spend so many hours per day at your job to, like you said, feel like you're just watching the clock tick by and drag on. That's definitely not the position that I know I want to be in. I want to feel excited about how I am spending my time. That's why it's so cool. You were selling your crafts before, but Etsy's kind of allowed you to expand. Actually, I should ask you. Since you've placed your items on Etsy, I assume you're doing more volume on Etsy than anywhere else now?

Sherrie: Right. I had to pull out of the other places because I could not keep up with trying to sell locally and keep up with Etsy as well. I do exclusively Etsy. And the amazing thing that I am still just shocked (about) is that I support myself. That's my only income.

[00:23:29] Brittany: And that's so cool that you can do that all through this one website. What would you say for someone who's thinking about starting a Etsy shop? For someone who is brand new, what piece of advice would you give them for

successfully selling on Etsy?

Sherrie: There are a lot of articles that Etsy puts out. I would definitely subscribe to those and read all of those. They interview sellers, and they have all kinds of tips and things. That's a great place to start. I read all of those, and I try to read all of them. I had a girl yesterday that's got a brand new shop. I think she only has six items in her shop. And she had written to me asking for advice. That's such a compliment. You kind of walk a thin line because you don't want to give away all of your secrets, you know, because you want to remain successful. But, at the same time, it's like I just think that helping others is the bottom line. If I can help someone, I'd love to. So I gave her a lot of advice. She really appreciated it. A lot of the advice that I gave her had to do with shipping; those great resources out there that I had to go through and figure all this out myself. I ship everything through the US Post Office, using priority mail. So I get all those (unintelligible), and they come and pick it up at my house. It's just extremely convenient.

Brittany: Yeah, it takes a lot of stress off of your shoulders, I am sure, not having to go to the Post Office.

Sherrie: Right, absolutely. So, I am here at the house packaging as quickly as I can before four o'clock, when my mailman gets here. It's like, "Wait, just one minute...just have to put some tape on there." So that's extremely helpful.

Some of my advice would be to reach out to other people who do sell some more items. I think that when people are successful, they don't mind sharing some of the things that they've learned and helping others out. That might be some of my advice - talk to other Etsy sellers.

Brittany: Yeah, absolutely. I know when I put my first item on Etsy and sold something on Etsy, I was just so surprised. I put it up and it was kind of mind blowing to me that someone was able to find it. And then actually go through and purchase it. It's such a cool feeling to experience, when you sell your first item on Etsy, or anywhere on line for that matter. I would just say, you know, get started. Put something up on there based on something that you

love doing. As Sherrie experienced, your business will kind of grow and evolve, and you'll learn how to increase profitability, and what people like over time. Your time and your experience will teach you so much. Would you agree with that, Sherrie?

[00:26:45] Sherrie: Absolutely yes. I have learned so much just by doing. Between doing it and looking at the shop stats - the reports and stuff that Etsy provides - kind of analyzing those and going from there. If you have something that's been there for a long time and it hasn't sold, you look at it and you say, 'Well, it's either no one likes it or it's priced too high.'

Brittany: You adjust.

Sherrie: You just kind of react, depending on what happens. You learn a lot from it. I would definitely agree.

Brittany: This is the last question. What do you think the secret to your success has been?

Sherrie: That's a hard one.

Brittany: There are probably many.

Sherrie: I would hope that maybe my passion shows through.

Brittany: Yeah.

Sherrie: I hope that I have an intense care, that I have a quality product, and that I don't want to just slop something together and throw it out there. I want it to be something that, you know, when somebody holds it up to the light and looks at it closely, they think, 'Wow, this is really done well.' That it's quality.

I think that and the fact that I have a little bit of a unique product. My signs are not like everybody's signs out there.

I think those are the things that have made it successful.

Brittany: Well, I think that is a great answer, particularly about your passion, you know? When

you have that strong passion, you do want to create a quality product. Creating a quality product is so important, because that's when you get repeat buyers. I'm sure many of your customers have come back after purchasing one and said, "This is so great," and bought another.

Sherrie: That's true, yes.

[00:28:51] Brittany: And that wouldn't really possible if you weren't creating a good product. I think that's really neat.

Well, Sherrie, thank you so much for getting on the phone and talking to me about this. I think the whole transition from you leaving a job that you really didn't feel 100 percent happy or fulfilled in, and then transitioning into something that, much to your surprise, you actually loved and now you're making even more money than you were before. It's just so cool, really inspiring to other people who are maybe in a position that you were in previously.

I really appreciate it, and thank you so much.

Sherrie: You're welcome. I appreciate talking to you.