WKU alum-founded Inked Brands expands locally

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With $4,000 and some local help, Western Kentucky University alumna April Foster founded Studio Calico as a crafts brand nearly two decades ago.

Today, it and other brands collaborate as Inked Brands: a consumer goods company she helps lead with roughly 100 employees, mostly composed of Western alumni — and one now committing $10.7 million to local expansion.

Estimating a spring completion, Inked Brands is nearly doubling its space, relocating from its site behind the Scottsville Road post office to a 68,000-square-foot facility under construction at the Vette City Antique Mall, by the National Corvette Museum. The $10.7 million primarily covers that expansion and another: hiring 20 people within 15 years — ideally, sooner, said Victoria Thompson, the company's director of people, AI and business operations.

"We've kind of already got our roots planted here in Bowling Green, right?" Thompson said. "Most of us are from here or have lived here long enough that our kids are from here now — and our employees, we would not be who we are without them.

"They are they've invested their time and their energy into our company, and so, we want to make sure that we return that investment."

The commonwealth is also recognizing their work through two commonwealth grants: $300,000 in tax incentives through the Kentucky Business Investment program, which aims to keep growing businesses in the commonwealth, and $50,000 through the Kentucky Enterprise Initiative Act, another incentive for businesses, once the project is finished.

"We love Kentucky, and love that they're giving us an incentive to continue doing business here," Foster added.

City and county leaders along with the local chamber of commerce and the governor shared praise for the company and its decision to expand locally.

“Anytime a local business expands here in the commonwealth, it is a testament to the quality of work they are doing, their leadership, workforce, and support from local and city officials,” Gov. Andy Beshear wrote in a statement. “Inked Brands has operated here in Kentucky for a decade, and this announcement is an exciting next step for them as a company and for the Bowling Green community.”

A local story

The story began 19 years ago. Foster, the founder of Studio Calico, was a crafts influencer and blogger, and her friend Ali Edwards asked for help.

The two collaborated, offering products with Edwards’ intellectual property — and business skyrocketed, said Foster, who leads the company today.

It was the start of Inked Brands: today, a house of 12 brands, 11 female-founded, that make products that are paper, plastic, metal, wood, glass and ceramic. They aim to retain a connection to these products: For instance, unlike many growing companies, its new facility, like the current one, keeps the company’s warehouse and offices together so those in the company can be around their products.

The company operates them as individual businesses, where it designs, sources, develops the products, fulfills them and provides the customer service.

“We do everything cradle to grave for the brand,” Foster said.

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