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## It's a personal puzzle to solve

BY JANET CAGGIANO

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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Gretchen Shelton was like a lot of teenagers in high school. When she got bored in class, she'd doodle.

Twenty-five years later, she's turned that creativity into a career by specializing in custom crossword puzzles.

"For the person filling it out, it's a walk down memory lane," Shelton said. "It's not meant to stump the person. For that, you should pick up a New York Times."

Shelton, 40, started AcrossDown Traffic in November. Working from her Glen Allen home, she makes crossword puzzles for baby showers, birthday parties, business meetings, wedding showers and anniversaries.

"It's such a personal thing," said Beth Parrish, a Henrico County resident who purchased a crossword puzzle for her 14-year-old nephew for Christmas. "It's a great way for people to think back on the things they've done."

Parrish met Shelton at a school bazaar and then logged on to [www.acrossdowntraffic.com](http://www.acrossdowntraffic.com), selected the special event she was buying for and then answered questions like: What was the color of his first bike? What's his favorite pizza topping? Favorite movie?

For wedding showers, questions are geared toward couples. Newlyweds, for example, are expected to remember the location of their first date.

"It's geared toward a gift for special occasions, but we can really do anything," Shelton said.

She's arranged puzzles for cookie-exchange parties, book club meetings and family reunions. She comes up with all the questions and uses computer software to arrange the answers into a puzzle. She prints the puzzles, with answers on the back, and mails them to customers. Puzzles average 60 words and cost \$24.95 each. She typically can get orders back to customers in about a week. She completes about five puzzles a month.

"People love crossword puzzles," Shelton said. "This is just a different spin on one of those beloved things people like to do."

The concept is growing in popularity. Browse the Internet, and you'll find a few other people customizing crossword puzzles from their homes. Irene Wrenner from Essex, Vt., started Personal Puzzles ([www.personalpuzzles.com](http://www.personalpuzzles.com)) in 1993.

"I think it's popular because people want to do something that's completely custom and personal," she said. "They want something they can't get off the shelves."

That's one reason Parrish ordered the custom crossword puzzle for her nephew, who loved the

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gift.

"It's something you don't see everywhere else," she said.

Shelton made her first crossword puzzle when she was a teenager in New Jersey. While doodling in class, she would write down her friends' traits and then manually put them in a grid for a crossword puzzle.

"It took me months to complete," she said. "I'd sit down with a ruler and paper. But it was fun to do."

She moved to Richmond to study criminal justice at Virginia Commonwealth University, graduating in 1988. She returned to New Jersey to get her master's degree from Seton Hall. She worked as a criminal investigator and later at UPS.

She married in 1998 and stopped working three years later when she had her second child. The family relocated to Richmond in 2005.

"After the children were a little older, I didn't want to return to work but still wanted something," said Shelton, the mother of three. "I'm a very goal-driven person. I like a sense of personal accomplishment. The thought of starting something from the ground and building it up was very alluring to me."

She plans to attend bridal shows and other community events to advertise her business. She also offered her business to an integrated marketing class at VCU. The class is now studying AcrossDown Traffic and will offer a marketing plan as part of a class project.

"When you think about something like this, about running your own business, it can be a little overwhelming," Shelton said. "I just try to take it a little at a time and have fun with it."

If business gets slow, she can always kill time by completing a crossword puzzle.

"They make you think and keep you sharp," she said. "Because they are a challenge, you get a sense of conquering something when you complete one. They are life's great brainteasers"

Contact staff writer Janet Caggiano at [jcaggiano@timesdispatch.com](mailto:jcaggiano@timesdispatch.com) or (804) 649-6157.