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Mary Kay star aided by M.B.A. from Harvard

Tired of corporate life, she struck gold in cosmetics; 7 pink Cadillacs in 14 years; Gross revenue exceeded \$1 million seven times

By **Andrea K. Walker**
Sun Staff
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Gloria Mayfield Banks didn't wear makeup, but went to a Mary Kay skin care seminar anyway to support the host, her best friend.

She didn't intend to buy anything that night 14 years ago but walked out with a pink, signature Mary Kay bag filled to the brim with toner, lotion, cleanser and a face mask.

She decided to sell the cosmetics to help pay for a messy divorce - a turn in her life that eventually made her a millionaire.

Mary Kay was an unlikely choice for Mayfield Banks, who has an M.B.A. from Harvard and had held management positions at big corporations. Her mother thought selling lipstick and eye shadow was a waste of her degree.

"She was like 'Oh, no!'" Mayfield Banks, now 46, recalled. "'We just paid \$60,000 for you to go to Harvard and you're going to sell lipstick?'"

But corporate life had little appeal for the energetic young woman and selling cosmetics clearly did.

In five months, Mayfield Banks sold enough part time to win a pink Pontiac Grand Am. By the eighth month, cosmetics were producing

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earnings that surpassed her income from a \$60,000-a-year full-time job.

Two-and-half years after her first beauty class, she quit that job and began peddling blush and mascara full time.

Fourteen years later, Mayfield Banks has made more than \$2 million selling for Mary Kay.

In addition to all that cash, she's earned seven pink Cadillacs, diamond jewelry and many vacation trips to exotic locations around the world. (She returned last week from a 13-day whirlwind European trip with her second husband, Ken Banks.)

"I always tell people it's too good to be true," she said. "It really is."

Mary Kay executives say the [Ellicott City](#) resident is one of a handful of top performers for the Dallas-based company, which has nearly 1 million beauty consultants around the world. Last year they sold \$1.6 billion worth of beauty aids.

Mary Kay consultants move up in the organization by recruiting others. Mayfield Banks' network currently has more than 6,500 consultants, all of whom share their commissions with her.

Mayfield Banks has brought in more than \$1 million in annual gross revenue seven times. Only 200 Mary Kay women have done it even once. Only nine other women who share her corporate title of national sales director have a better sales record..

"She's moved up the ladder rapidly," said Gary Jinks, senior vice president of sales. "She's just done an extraordinary job."

Mayfield Banks said there was no magic formula to her rise.

The Detroit native grew up in a middle-class family, the third of four daughters. Her mother was a teacher and her father worked for the city's health department. Her parents encouraged her to aim high.

"They were great at building our self-esteem," she said. "They always complimented us and said what we were doing was important."

She graduated from Washington's Howard University in 1978 and moved to Boston, where she worked for Polaroid Corp. She got her M.B.A. in 1982 and then worked for International Business Machines Corp. and Stratus Computers in the Boston area.

Shortly before starting with Mary Kay, Mayfield Banks had left a management position with Stratus to work at Harvard because she

didn't enjoy the cutthroat corporate environment.

"It [the corporate job] was the type of job most people wanted at my age," she said. But she was unhappy.

Using skills learned at Harvard and from her corporate background, she approached selling skin care with the methodical intensity of a trained manager. She combined all that with an outgoing personality and the easy connections she made with people.

In her spare time she studied sales techniques and took every training course Mary Kay offered.

She began by asking friends to suggest potential customers rather than selling directly to them. She figured it was too easy for people close to her to say no. If a woman preferred Cover Girl lipstick, she didn't try to change her mind. Instead, she looked for customers who could be convinced - nicely - to try the product.

"You don't have to be aggressive or pushy," she said. "You might need to be pleasantly persistent."

Recruiting more sales associates was easy, she said. She targeted ambitious professional women who liked the flexibility of Mary Kay and the idea of earning extra money.

Her two children remember life in the early days being all about Mary Kay. There were boxes of makeup stacked up in the basement of their house in Boston, and Mom spent a lot of time on the phone.

"There was always a lot of women in the house," said her 16-year-old son Chauncey Mayfield. "But we kept moving to bigger houses, so I figured she must have done well."

Mayfield Banks began eyeing company records as a way to challenge herself. She made it a goal to beat as many as she could, and now holds three company records.

"I always tried to think bigger," she said.

She said she found a nurturing environment at Mary Kay that was missing at her previous jobs. It felt more like a sorority than a billion-dollar conglomerate. Women encouraged and mentored each other and office politics was missing.

She showed up at a company meeting early in her career wearing blue eye shadow, not a flattering color for black skin. Instead of ridicule, she got a makeup lesson.

Her makeup is impeccable these days, and now, she's giving the

lessons.

She led a recent sales meeting at the Wyndham Hotel in downtown Baltimore with the pep-rally spirit of Oprah Winfrey, wearing a carefully selected long royal blue jacket with cuffs folded over the sleeve.

"Shut up!" she yells in cheerful congratulation to a woman who had surpassed her monthly commission goals.

"You go, girlfriend!" she said to another while giving her a high-five.

Later in the meeting, she sounded like a rhyming Southern Baptist minister, spreading wisdom among members of her flock.

A woman from Virginia reported \$40,000 in sales during March, prompting the other beauty consultants to erupt in wild applause.

"I promise you she puts on her underwear the same way you do," Mayfield Banks shouted above the racket. "Whatever she has, you can, too."

Lynne Heritage, a Mary Kay senior sales representative from Laurel, said Mayfield Banks always makes her feel she can do more. "She pushes the buttons that make us want to work harder," she said.

Renee Muhammad, who has sold Mary Kay for 15 months, said she was blown away when she met the million-dollar seller.

"It was awesome," she said. "She didn't know me from a can of beans, but she was so warm."

Mayfield Banks works from a small office across from her home in [Ellicott City](#). Some mornings she walks across the yard to work in her pajamas.

She moved to Maryland in 1997 after marrying Ken, the owner of Banks Contracting Co. in Baltimore. Both divorcees, the pair met at a water park in Orlando, Fla., where each had taken their children. Six years later, she proposed to him at a Mary Kay convention.

The sill of her office window is lined with pictures of her posing with Mary Kay Ash, the woman who founded Mary Kay in 1963 with \$5,000. The walls are plastered with Mary Kay plaques and family pictures.


Mayfield Banks said some people can't get beyond pink Cadillacs to look at Mary Kay as a legitimate business. But since Ash died in 2001, a number of books have been written about the company, garnering it new respect, she noted.


Even her mother has come around. These days, she's selling Mary Kay, too - at age 79.

"They make you feel appreciated about what you do," Mayfield Banks noted with a smile.

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