

## Westside Stories

Dana Dennett

By Forrest Preece

Staff Writer

One thing I like about eating at a private club is that people seem to let their guard down a bit and often you can strike up conversations. That happened to Linda and me one night not long ago. We were having dinner at a downtown club, and as we were finishing up, we started talking across the room to a nice looking woman who was sitting by her-self. Being the shy and retiring types that we are, pretty soon we were sitting with her and having after dinner coffee before her companion arrived.

Turns out, Dana Dennett has quite a story to tell, and I became intrigued with what is going on in her life. I must say that Dana has had some of the most varied experience I've heard about in a while. Foremost, her business – The Sterling Hills Silver Company, a silver cleaning company – is a testament to drive, spirit, and plain old American free private enterprise. And I'll get to that.

### Setting her flight plan

Dana is part of an Air Force family that made the usual set of travel during her childhood. Her father is Colonel James Dennett and he is quite a fellow. This 80-year-old ex-fighter pilot from the WWII, Korea and Vietnam era runs through Pease Park with his dogs every day. According to Dana, "He takes care of every lost animal he comes across." Dana is a dog lover herself and has two shelties, Kirby and Spooky, plus a "special needs" dog Rhys.

Another of her loves is flying. "I've wanted to take airplanes up since I was nine," Dana says. "I would often go to the flight line at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines and thrilled to the sight and roar of jets- this would follow Dana the rest of her life. "One day my dad asked me what I wanted to

be, and I said that" I'd like to be the Manager of Chicago O'Hare Airport". "I was embarrassed to let him know I too would love to fly for a living. "

Later, I found out (through my father's encouragement) that maybe I really could sit in a pilot's seat." Dana is working on building up her log of flight hours. In fact, the night we met her, she had just flown back from Colorado to Austin. "I've met so many good people in the flying community here in Austin and I've made friends with a lot of people who are very generous with their planes. "What really set me on my course to keep flying is when I flew with a friend from Monterrey, Mexico, to Vancouver, British Columbia. That was four-and-a-half-hour trip. At that point, I was so hooked. Eventually, I would like to buy a plane of my own. "There are lots of possibilities."



Kirby and Spooky, Dana's best pals

Before Dana came to Austin to be with her dad she earned a BS degree in Business and Public Relations at South Dakota State and then a BS in Science at the School of Mines. Then she moved to Denver, where she was a meeting planner for a prominent hotel.

After that, she worked in North Carolina, where her great grandfather, the industrialist David T. Vance, started the Tar Heel Mica Company in 1894. The firm still imports and manufactures mica. She has worked for United Way agencies, one that was involved with female juveniles at risk, and another concerned with autistic adults in a work center training environment.

But the lure of Austin was strong; returning here seemed to be right. I went to High School here (Austin High) "We're members at Good Shepherd now well over 35 years now and of course my dad was here. I knew that I'd enjoy being back in Austin, and I was right."

## Polishing Treasures

In 2001, Dana's job of planning meetings for Higher Educational Association disappeared this was around 9/11. "That was jarring" Dana says "I sat around for a while, wondering about what I wanted to do, and in the meantime, I started polishing our Silver:!"



Dana Dennett shows off her shiny handiwork.

As a Colonel's wife, her late mother, the former (Sammie Vance Dennett) had always been a gracious and elegant hostess for military parties. "I spent a lot of my childhood helping her set things up for entertaining. Polishing was relaxing and settling process A task I actually enjoyed! "Soon after my layoff, I did it for relaxation. It dawned on me that maybe this could be a business and all of my friends concurred!"

And what a business it has turned out to be. "I printed some business cards and got a few jobs mostly at first through friends. As word spread, I started getting calls from more and more people. And not just at Christmas or other holidays. The wedding and shower seasons are busy, too. At the most active times, I bring in extra help."

You want to talk about a people business Polish silver is all about personal relationships. "Some people are so nervous about letting me take their family heirlooms off site. It is like the pieces are part of the family. But I've found that once they meet with me and I talk with them a while, I often leave with more much more than I came for in the first place."

Dana delivers pieces in high end Pacific Silver cloth® which protects the silver and keeps it shiny. The cloth has silver in it and prevents tarnishing. "Plastic is bad for silver." And she's not just doing teapots and table settings. Doorknobs and other fixture are part of her repertoire. "I help contractors on home building and renovation jobs. A fellow here in town specializes in brass and we often team up on projects.

"We also work with insurance companies to document valuables on CDs. For people with expensive pieces to insure, this is really important. And to protect my customers and myself, I'm bonded."

It's a business she's had to invent herself, Dana says. "For research, I stayed with my sister in Washington, D.C., and we visited several silversmiths. One place up there near Baltimore is just perfect it had a polishing service up front and a tea room in back. Opening a place like that in Austin would be my absolute dream."

For a woman who flies high in planes, and with her ambition, I'd say there's a good chance that might become reality. By the way, if you want to give her service a try, you can reach her at 527-9085 or check her website at [www.sterlinghilssilver.com](http://www.sterlinghilssilver.com)

Dana says that the best part of the job is the delivery. "This is much better than bringing people flowers. You should see their faces light up when the pieces are unveiled. Often they excitedly exclaim, "I haven't seen it like that before! And the crowning glory is when we help put together an entire table setting a party or dinner."