

Athens Moment Makers

Three women who have cornered the Athens customizable celebration market.

Avery Collier hunches over a wooden table clustered with her crafting materials that's wedged between her kitchen and her living room. She outlines cookies with an icing bag labeled "P" for piping. When she's completed the outlines for all the cookies in front of her, she grabs the icing bag labeled "F" to fill the blank faces of the cookies. She only has four Chick-fil-A "C"s left to outline. She's been working for the past two hours on the base coat of this order. A pan of 28 cookies, already iced, sit across the table from her.

Collier creates customizable sugar cookies through her business, [Ace of Bakes Custom Cookies](#). This week's batch was ordered by one of her friends, an employee at Chick-fil-A, commemorating a deal between the company and DoorDash.



(Collier works on an order April 7, 2021 for one of her friends who works for Chick-fil-A. This custom order is for 150 cookies. She typically bakes on Mondays, puts down the base color on Tuesdays, starts the decoration on Wednesdays, and will pack up the order by the end of the week depending on the day she's agreed to deliver the cookies. Photo/Hayley Croke)

She bakes the cookies, finds the designs, decorates, packages, and delivers her orders herself. She admits her business puts a strain on other aspects of her life, but she feels the long hours, lack of sleep and I-have-to-stay-in-tonight's are eclipsed by the opportunities she has to help others celebrate their big moments.

Collier is one of many students who have taken advantage of the monumental moments celebrated in Athens. From graduations to 21st birthdays to first jobs, college towns have developed a new sector of the event planning market. The University of Georgia's customizable celebration market has developed rapidly with current students and recent graduates leading the pack. New traditions like custom 21st birthday signs, group graduation photoshoots and hand-painted graduation caps are creating a demand for these types of business structures and these young entrepreneurs are putting in the work to keep up with the onslaught of requests.

A graduation cap speaks a thousand words

[Marni Rein](#) has been building up a rhythm, a system, a graduation cap painting machine since her freshman year of college.

In the midst of graduation season, business is booming. She creates anywhere from 10 to 15 customized caps each season. This year is bitter-sweet, however, as Rein's graduation ceremony was supposed to be held this time last year. Rein chooses to not focus on the moment taken away from her.

"I guess people letting me kind of celebrate with them is really awesome. I don't know if they realize it or not. I've made some great connections through painting people's caps," Rein said.

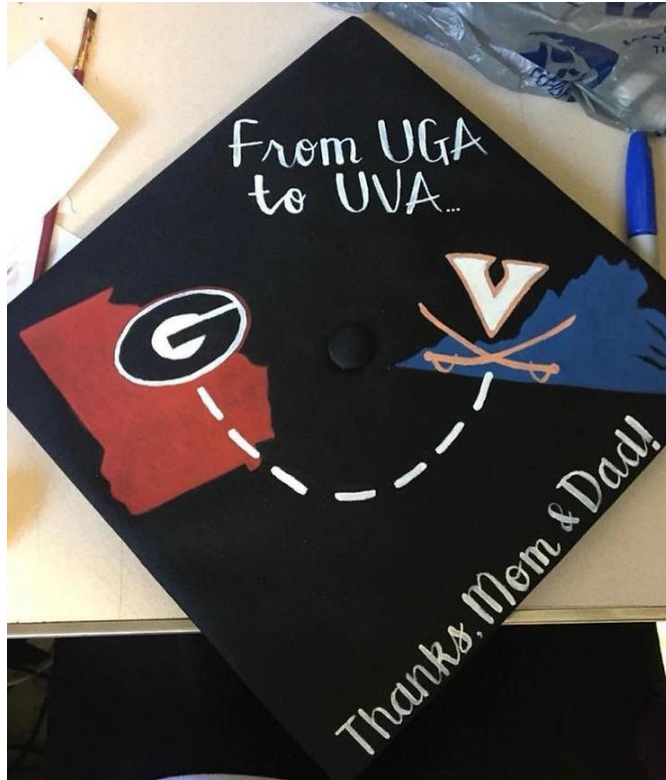


(Rein struggled when it came to creating her own cap after four years of designing caps for other people. She ultimately settled on showing off her favorite parts of Athens and college. Her graduation ceremony was postponed due to COVID-19. She attended the ceremony held in October but admits "it wasn't the same." Photo Courtesy/Marni Rein)

Art has always been the realm in which Rein is able to express herself freely. She says while her psychology major had nothing obvious to do with her business, she finds herself using it more than one would expect within an art business.

"I've always loved getting into people's minds and figuring out their wants and it works really well when it comes to art."

Each cap Rein paints is different from the last. Her work ranges from expressing simple sentiments to elaborate jokes.



(Rein's first graduation cap was made for her friend who knew of her artistic skills. "One of my good friends was a senior and she asked me to decorate her cap just on a whim," Rein said. While she paints caps for \$75 to \$100 plus now, her friend took her out to dinner as a thank you for this first one. Photo Courtesy/Marni Rein)

The first cap she painted was in 2017 for a friend. They decided to keep it simple. Rein painted the state of Georgia in red with the UGA logo and the state of Virginia in orange with a University of Virginia logo. There was an arrow connecting the two as her friend was attending UVA for graduate school. More intricate caps have included a purple background and yellow picture frame, depicting the front door of the apartment from "Friends," with the saying "The One With The Genetics Degree."



(Rein has extensive conversations with her clients in order to collaborate on the design of their caps to ensure both parties are on the same page. “Some people have ideas, some people don't. I normally suggest to customers that they go through websites like Redbubble, Society Six, they can look through my past art, and also just make a list of things that are important to them,” Rein said. Photo Courtesy/Rein)

Rein creates these caps devoid of her own ego. She meets her clients in the twilight of their college career. Rein works with them on every aspect of their design. She acknowledges her art is meant to represent them at a major turning point in their life, which she values more than the money she makes from helping them.

“I'm not really doing it for the profit I guess. I come up with the initial design, but I'm not sitting there for the whole process, trying to come up with my own design, you know. I have what we made, and now I'm making it real,” Rein said.

Leaving Athens

[Apoorva Dhanala](#) charges less than her peers in the graduation photography field. She's a third-year computer science major who has only this year begun official graduation photoshoots. She considers herself lucky to have an outlet to practice her photography.

"You know those questions you get where it's like "If you could do something for the rest of your life and not worry about money what would you do?" I would definitely do photography," Dhanala said.

Typically Dhanala charges women \$175 for an hour and a half to a two hour shoot with as many locations as she can get to within the time allotted, multiple outfit changes, and a gallery of photos individually edited. She charges men \$125 for the same package, but most men's shoots are significantly shorter with much less posing involved.

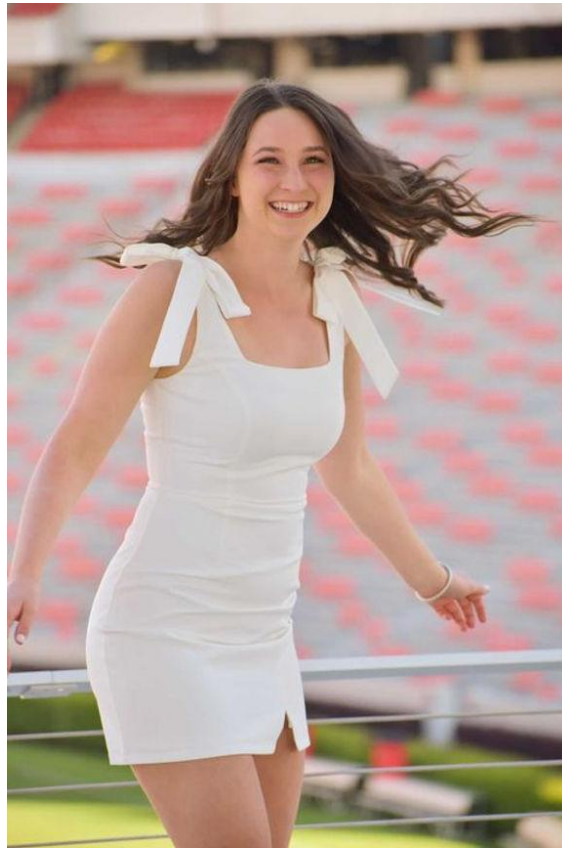


(This is a still from one Apoorva's graduation photoshoots. She says once she began photographing people she didn't know, she realized how much you can learn about a person through taking their graduation photos. Photo Courtesy/Apoorva Dhanala)

The graduation photography business has established photographers charging anywhere from \$250 to \$400 plus for shoots. Even by charging less, Dhanala has been able to turn a profit from

her graduation photography due to her relatively low cost of operations. Most of her materials are one time purchases.

Dhanala takes anywhere from 600 to 700 photos at every shoot which she narrows down to 80 to edit for the client. She edits each photo to look cohesive with the rest of the shoot. Different locations and lighting ensure each picture requires individual care. The backend of each shoot is roughly three hours.



(This is another still from one of Apoorva's graduation photoshoots. Dhanala takes photos at all the standard hot-spots for graduation photos like the Arch, Sanford Stadium, the Chapel Bell, and the Founders Memorial Garden. Her clients often bring props and changes of clothes. Photo Courtesy/Apoorva Dhanala)

“That’s not really a side of photography that’s shown. Before I started doing this myself that wasn’t something I had in mind. It’s easy in that it’s something I really enjoy, but there is a significant time trade off.”

Dhanala doesn't believe in turning people away because she'll make less of a profit. She's been approached before with negotiations for booking less time, fewer photos or singular locations. She's never said no.

"I don't want money to be the reason they don't get their pictures taken," Dhanala said.

"If you hand me a pencil I couldn't do what I do on a cookie"

In fall of 2019, [Avery Collier](#) was trying to raise money for one of her favorite student lead organizations, Shop With a Bulldog. She had seen cookie decorating videos all over her Instagram explore page. She explains her fascination with these videos as she sits at her work station. She keeps her head down. She wears a big t-shirt with the saying "let's dough this" underneath cartoonish sketches of baking utensils. She grips the icing bag with her right hand but guides its movements with the pointer finger of her left hand, exhibiting extreme caution. Her hair is too short for the front pieces to be secured in her low ponytail, she pins down the pieces in the front of her hair with two clips.

"I made a bunch of pre-decorated cookies and then sold them to people and people started being like 'Hey, these are really good, can you do this theme or that theme?' and then it just kind of snowballed," Collier said.

Collier's busiest season is without a doubt Christmas. Between Dec. 7 and Dec. 23 Collier created 713 cookies. She sells the cookies by the dozen starting at \$40 a batch. The spring also brings in a lot of business with an influx of engagements, weddings, and graduations happening. Sometimes, however, the orders become more than Collier can manage.



(Collier has accumulated a collection of cookie cutters throughout her business, she says the baby-related ones are her favorite at the moment. Collier keeps the collection in her bedroom next to her desk where she has many Zoom classes in which professors have stopped class to ask about the collection in frame.
Photo Courtesy/Avery Collier)

“I’m not great at saying no. I want to be able to help people celebrate. I guess long term it’s inconsequential but it always feels big at the time,” Collier admits.

During her busy seasons she’s even referred those she can’t help to other bakers in Athens who would be considered her competition.

“If I can’t help them I try to refer them to someone who can.” Her go-to referral for her Athens customers is [Baylee Bakes](#).

The aspiring occupational therapist never thought her business would accumulate over 400 Instagram followers within its first year, especially given her lack of expertise in the design field.



(Collier's secret weapon is the mini projector she was gifted this Christmas. To create each design, she uses the projector to project the image she is trying to recreate onto the cookies. She traces over the projected image with her homemade icing. Photo/Hayley Croke)

"I am not artistic. If you hand me a pencil I couldn't do what I do on a cookie. I am just terrible artistically and it's always kind of been a joke," Collier said.



(Collier created her business in 2019, but Ace of Bakes Custom Cookies made its Instagram debut on March 30, 2020. Within 24 hours she gained 100 followers and now, over a year later, she has over 400 followers. Photo/Hayley Croke)

Collier's last year of college has been flooded with custom cookie requests and calculations to create the perfect icing consistency. While the business gives her an outlet for creative expression, at times it also burdens her with entrepreneurial responsibility.

“Sometimes as a college student when you feel like you have so many things on your chest with school and extracurriculars and work, and on days where it's stressful it feels like ‘Oh, I have to do that too,’ But then I remind myself I don't have to do that, I get to do that.”