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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

JUNE 13, 2011

If a Child's in Need...Start a Business

The tales of three entrepreneurs who began their start-ups as caring parents

By CHUCK GREEN

Some of the best ideas for new businesses come from the most basic of inspirations: parental love.

Journal Report

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noise-damping gadget that will help an autistic boy feel at ease in social situations.

Maybe your child has diabetes, and you want clothes that will make her feel more comfortable wearing an insulin pump. Or you need tasty foods to help a teenager who's struggling to maintain a gluten-free diet. Or a

Many parents not only come up with solutions to help their kids—they also sell their creations to other people in the same bind. Along the way, these entrepreneurs of necessity often find rewards that other business owners don't. Not only do they get to help their loved ones and stop feeling powerless, but they also can make a difference in other people's lives. And getting heartfelt testimonials along with sales can help an entrepreneur through the rough patches any new venture faces.

Still, a driving passion isn't a guarantee of success. "Sometimes the market's so small for that uniquely targeted need that it's not big enough to create a profitable business around," says Karyn Greenstreet, president of Passion for Business LLC, a consulting service for entrepreneurs, in Revere, Pa.

Here's a look at three entrepreneurs who have traveled this path—successfully or not—and what they discovered along the way.

Passion Pays Off

Julie DeFrusco had always wanted to run a business with her best friend. But it took some heartbreaking news to make those plans a reality.



Pump Wear Inc.

For Julie DeFrusco, her daughter Nikki's diabetes diagnosis was a big blow—but also the spark for a start-up.

It was June 2000. Ms. DeFrusco was a busy mom in Cohoes, N.Y., working a full-time job as an accounting manager while raising her two-year-old daughter, Nikki, and two sons. Then Nikki was diagnosed with Type I diabetes—her body wasn't producing insulin, which could lead to dangerously high blood-sugar levels. "It was a nightmare," Ms. DeFrusco says. "That was the day that our lives changed forever. Nothing would ever be the same."

The condition would mean monitoring her daughter's diet and facing years of potential medical problems. In addition, Nikki would need to wear an insulin pump to help stabilize her blood sugar.

Love and Lots of Money

The pump was ugly and



tough to hide, says Ms. DeFruscio. She asked a friend's mother to make a shirt that would hide the pump, something that would let Nikki have easy access to the gadget while making her feel more comfortable wearing it. The shirt turned out

great, but Ms. DeFruscio didn't want to ask the woman to sew a whole wardrobe. And after searching online, she couldn't find anything else that came close.

"It was awful to see such ugly medical-looking items that were our only choices for a little girl," says the 51-year-old Ms. DeFruscio. "As parents, you want your children to have the fun and cute things."

The opportunity for a business was obvious. Ms. DeFruscio brought her longtime friend Dawn Juneau, who was working as a secretary, on board as a partner. Neither had any experience in business, but they plowed ahead, offering T-shirts as well as accessories, such as insulin-pump cases, that kids can customize.

Launching Pump Wear Inc. meant Ms. DeFruscio had to rearrange her life, working from home late into the night and handing off many of the everyday household duties to her husband, Mark. Navigating the unfamiliar difficulties of the business world was also a struggle at first, such as finding a manufacturer that was affordable but still reliable.

Once the company's website was up and running, the partners started pitching their products to diabetes groups and educators, which got orders rolling in. From there, they came to rely on recommendations from the diabetes groups, as well as medical offices, insulin-pump sales reps and satisfied customers—many of whom also thanked the company for their work.

The knowledge that she was helping people helped keep Ms. DeFruscio on course. "The best compliment we've received is when a child who doesn't have diabetes wants one of our cases," she says. "I think that says it all. It's all about making our kids feel good about themselves and look great."

More than 10 years later, the company is still "holding its own," Ms. DeFruscio says. She won't disclose her revenue, but says it has been strong enough to allow her to leave her job and keep Pump Wear afloat in a rough economy. She and Ms. Juneau have also been diversifying, offering products such as diabetes-awareness items and medical-alert products; they've also been doing more charity work.

Nikki, meanwhile, "is a thriving 13-year-old girl" who's active in cheerleading and sports and helps out with the company, Ms. DeFruscio says. "Nikki has not let her diabetes stop her from doing everything she loves to do, and is a true inspiration to me."

A Hot Start Cools Off

Marlene Rich became an entrepreneur while trying to fill a very basic need: finding food that tasted good—but didn't make her and her daughter sick.

Four years ago, Ms. Rich's daughter, Jordan, had to go gluten free to help with her dyslexia and attention-deficit disorder. In a show of support, Ms. Rich took up the same regimen.

Under the new diet, Jordan's focus in school improved considerably—as did Ms. Rich's health. She discovered, in fact, that she had been gluten intolerant for years without realizing it. Yet the two struggled to adjust to the new diet. The gluten-free breads they tried were small, expensive and not very tasty, "especially after sitting in her locker for half the day," says the



The Rich Family

Marlene Rich and her daughter, Jordan, had to go gluten free. And that led to a baking business.

55-year-old Ms. Rich, of Manhattan Beach, Calif. They also had to sacrifice pasta, pizza, bagels, crackers and some chips.

Desserts, likewise, were mostly impossible. Regular treats didn't pass muster, and specialty items were less than appealing. "The cookies that came out of the box had no taste or were much too sweet, and the consistency was dry and hard," says Ms. Rich.

Luckily, she had a support group of friends with similar restrictions. Together, they started experimenting with family recipes, looking for ways to keep the taste and texture while eliminating ingredients that would cause problems. "A lot of stuff ended up in the garbage," she says. They eventually figured out how to use blends of different flours, as well as

xanthan gum, a binder that holds baked goods together.

The women were content simply to feed their families, until they brought samples to places like Pilates classes. Fellow students "went crazy" over the treats, says Ms. Rich. "They said, 'You guys should just open a business.' "

The idea clicked with them. The women had extra time since their kids had gone off to college, and they were willing to work hard because of their own need for the products. "We knew that if we were feeling this way, then others out there were feeling that way too," Ms. Rich says.

The business launched last July under the name Daily Knead. At first, the partners sold their goods through a website, then set up shop at a farmer's market. Along the way, they landed a wholesale contract with a local pizza company with five locations, supplying a couple of hundred cookies and brownies weekly.

But then things started to unravel. Profit margins were slim, and it would have taken a bigger investment of time and capital to bring in more money, Ms. Rich and two of her partners say. (The third didn't reply to requests for comment.) They weren't ready to take the step, so they agreed to fold Daily Knead.

While the four women made mistakes along the way, Ms. Rich believes their efforts paid off. "We were all so happy to finally have readily available fresh-baked, gluten-free goods," she says. "We were even happier to share them with our friends and people in the area that were also on this diet."

A Modest Success

Ray Schmidt's education and early work experience were centered on people with disabilities. He ended up drawing on that training to help his own son.



Mary Schmidt

Ray Schmidt's son, Jon, had trouble in social situations because of autism. Dad's answer, a digital gadget.

As a two-year-old, Jon was diagnosed with autism, and as he got older, he started to withdraw into himself. The slightest stimuli caused anxiety; when the family went out, almost anything was difficult for Jon, down to a restaurant's lighting or construction. The family began retreating from the community "just to survive," says the 51-year-old Mr. Schmidt.

About 11 years ago, Mr. Schmidt decided to draw on his background to come up with a solution. His brainstorm: a hand-held gadget with headphones that block ambient sounds and let his son watch digital movies.

"The result was wonderful," Mr. Schmidt says. "Jon was happy to go anywhere, we could start to do things out in public as a family again. It seems like a small thing, but for Jon to be happy when we went out to eat

or when we went to church was a landmark moment in our family life."

The device not only helped Jon—other parents approached the Schmidts to ask where they could get one. "My wife said it made autism a 'designer disability,'" Mr. Schmidt says.

These were the days before easily available media players and digital movies, and Mr. Schmidt thought he might have a chance to supply people with something missing from the market. At the time, he was a vice president at One Write Co., a Lancaster, Ohio, company that makes envelopes for church offerings. He says the company, in a "benevolent spirit," supported the development and production of Mr. Schmidt's device.

One Write also hired a programmer named Sue Maggi, who would become Mr. Schmidt's business partner. "I would come up with a harebrained idea, she would tell me how impossible it was, and by the next morning it would be a feature," he says.

Over time, they added features to the device, including an option that made it easier for autistic people to manage social interactions; the device could produce a synthesized voice to help when the user found it difficult to talk to someone. That feature inspired the name of the gadget: Cyrano, after Cyrano de Bergerac.

"Having a child with a disability tends to change your focus so that you're continuously looking for solutions," Mr. Schmidt says. "Once we had a program that could select movies by simply pressing a picture of the movie, I realized we had the start of a communication system."

Getting the word out was a real learning experience, Mr. Schmidt says. "Our first show was a consumer show in Orlando in 2004, and it was incredible," he says. "People would come to the booth and get so excited—they were still at our booth working with the machine as we were tearing down the booth to catch the plane back home." Over time, he focused on marketing to speech therapists, since "they're the ones who will work with the family to help build a solution."

In 2006, Mr. Schmidt and Ms. Maggi introduced Cyrano 2, which added a host of new features to the device, including a choice of more synthesized voices. Last year, One Write sold Mr. Schmidt the rights and inventory to the Cyrano on "very generous" terms, he says. To market the device, he and Ms. Maggi formed Kiba Technologies LLC—short for *kiba kiba*, which means "peace" in the Rapa Nui language. "I later learned that kiba also means 'fang' in Japanese," Mr. Schmidt says. "I'm still looking for the hidden meaning in that."

Today, the revenue from Cyrano is modest. Given the economy, and the fact that there are so many competing digital players out there, Mr. Schmidt expects more hardships. But he says that he and Ms. Maggi have made a conscious decision to manage Kiba as a micro-business—running the company in their spare time, keeping their expenses low and holding day jobs. Mr. Schmidt, for his part, works with people with developmental disabilities. His wife, Mary, has also come on board at Kiba, helping keep in touch with clients and handling the books.

"Our primary goal is to provide an answer for families in need," Mr. Schmidt says. "If we can do that, we're a success."

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