

FLYING SOLO:

Six Women Business Owners Describe the Joy of Doing it All Themselves

By SCOTT CULLEN

It takes a couple of things commonly associated with the male anatomy to take the plunge into the uncertain and sometimes frightening world of sole entrepreneurship. Along with that plunge are the obligatory questions such as; can I find enough clients to sustain this, what if I have cash flow problems, and what if it doesn't work out?

But sole entrepreneurship offers a whole lot of opportunities as well. A 2006 study released by the Center of Women's Business Research reveals that between 1992 and 2004, privately held, women-owned firms without employees grew at twice the rate of all U.S. non-employer firms (18 percent vs. 9 percent). Additionally, these firms represent one-third of all privately held U.S. firms without employees and account for one fifth of all sales by non-employer firms.

We spoke with five Mercer County women about what inspired them to take this path, the obstacles along the way, and the challenges of running a do-it-all-yourself business.

An Unplanned Move

Becoming a sole entrepreneur was not part of Teri McIntire's plan. It was a decision that made sense four years ago when she adopted her daughter and realized her current position wouldn't provide the flexibility she needed with a new child. "That motivated me to leave the workforce," says McIntire.

But she didn't exactly leave the workforce. Instead she came back full force thanks to previous clients and associates who called and asked her to do a job here and a job there. Before you could say "Maya Marketing, LLC", McIntire had a home office set up, a business loan, a LLC and her new business, Maya Marketing, LLC was up and running. Today, McIntire's business has grown to where she can now afford to rent office space in downtown Princeton.



Teri McIntire of Maya Marketing

McIntire's firm develops strategic marketing programs for companies that own or manager real estate assets. Most of her clients are based in New York and New Jersey and own properties in Central New Jersey. The Borough of Princeton is also a client. "I've always worked in the commercial real estate industry as the marketing arm," explains McIntire. "Now I'm able to do that same position on a consulting basis."

For McIntire the biggest challenge of going solo was that it was totally unplanned. "It wasn't an anticipated move to go from a full time work force to start a company," she says. "It would have been easier if I had planned for it."

Juggling multiple tasks has also been challenging. "I'm doing the business development, the office manager job, accounts payable and receivable," notes McIntire. "What that's hurt is my ability to go out and do extra curricular networking events."

Even though she's on her own, McIntire understands the value of strategic alliances. That's why she recently entered into one with Thomas/Boyd Communications, a public relations firm based in Moorestown. "This alliance promises to generate more work," predicts McIntire.

McIntire dismisses the notion that it's

all that different for a woman working in business mostly because she's always worked in a male-dominated business. "I've often been the only women at the table and that hasn't changed," laughs McIntire. She says that she hasn't had time yet to explore opportunities offered by the State of New Jersey of being a woman-owned business. "I know there are benefits, but I haven't pursued them yet," she says. "It's on my 2007 hit list."

What's the best thing about being a sole entrepreneur? "Hands down it's the flexibility," she quips. Her daughter attends nursery school down the street from McIntire's office. And if her daughter is sick or doesn't have school, McIntire works from her home office. "It's like a dream come true as far as a work situation," she says, while adding that she takes the brunt of the day-to-day responsibilities in the family. "I'm okay with that," she notes, explaining that her husband travels 6-8 days a month.

But with all that flexibility comes a lot of responsibility and big expectations. "Your client rides you harder than any boss can ever ride you because they have you for a small pocket of time and each one expects 100-110 percent," says McIntire.

Editor to Interior Designer

Three years ago Donna Hill Krupa took her life-long love of interior decorating, left her position at Mercer Business magazine where she had spent the previous 18 years, and launched her business, Interiors by Decorating Den. So far it's been an illuminating and rewarding experience. Much of her work is residential although she does some commercial interiors too. She works from her home in Bordentown City in an old carriage house on her property.

It wasn't a snap decision though. She briefly considered going back to school, but with her daughter's many extracurricular activities and a full-time job, there just



Donna Hill Krupa of Interiors by Decorating Den

wasn't the time. Enter the Interiors by Decorating Den franchise, which offered intense training in a short amount of time and Hill Krupa was ready to make her mark as a sole entrepreneur. "I felt like I needed to do something different and had a passion for interior decorating," she says. "I knew marketing well. I knew sales well. I knew decorating well, so everything went together nicely."

Hill Krupa doesn't consider her transition from the relatively stable world of publishing at Mercer Business to the great unknown of sole entrepreneurship a big deal. "When I started it never occurred to me I was making such a bold move. People used to say, 'How did you get the nerve to do this? Aren't you afraid it's not going to take off?' Those things never entered my mind. It was like, 'I'll do it and I'll do it well.'"

Like the other sole entrepreneurs with connections to the Chamber, Hill Krupa tapped into those relationships too. "Before I even opened my doors, I already had people lined up to see and things worked out really well. My second year is when I had to rely on marketing."

She doesn't think of herself as a woman business owner, but simply a business owner. "I've never taken advantage of some of the State and Federal programs that provide you with the benefits of that because I'm not looking for commercial work," she says.

One thing that Hill Krupa believes makes a difference as a woman business owner is balancing work and a family. "I know men do a lot these days in making the household run, but for me I'm still the person going to field hockey games, soccer games, and piano lessons, and all the other things I do for my daughter. This position has given me flexibility because I'm making my own hours, but yet I'm putting a lot more in."

Close to Home

Marsha Stoltman, owner of The Stoltman Group LLC, a corporate event planning organization, has been enjoying the life of a sole entrepreneur for the past 5-7 years. Her firm does everything from determining the type of event, to finding a location, to logistics, along with marketing, public relations, registration, and on-site production.

Prior to starting her business, Stoltman toiled in publishing, working for various companies in Princeton and New York City, including a trade publication for the newspaper industry that produced large conferences and trade shows all over the world. But it was a desire to work closer to home that inspired her to go her own way.

"I always loved what I did and I loved being in the corporate world, but I never really worked in my community and I



Marsha Stoltman of the Stoltman Group

wanted to be a local business person," says Stoltman. So, she made a life-altering decision to start a business centered in Mercer County.

Like all of the women profiled in this article, no bridges were burned in the making of their new businesses. "I was fortunate when I started because I was able to take my former employer as my first client," notes Stoltman. Today, she works from her home in Mercerville with most of her business centered in Central New Jersey although she has clients throughout the state as well as New York.

Timing unfortunately was not on Stoltman's side when she began her business in May 2001. "We were in a recession and one of the first things that are eliminated from corporate budgets is travel and conferences, so I was dealing with a difficult business in a difficult time and then 9/11 happened."

That was the biggest challenge she had

to overcome. She also pleads naivety in not knowing how much was involved in running a business, particularly since she no longer had the resources she once had in the corporate world. But she learned to make do. "When you're starting out, you're everything," says Stoltman. "That was quite a challenge, but I was determined to make this work."

And how did she make it work? "You learn to subcontract, hire help, or do it yourself," she says. The business has been successful enough for Stoltman to hire a part-time administrator and she sub-contracts or partners with other companies or planners depending on the size of the project.

Stoltman remains in close contact with associates and clients from her years in the corporate world and she belongs to a number of associations, including the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners and The Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce where she serves on the board. "That's been incredibly helpful in terms of meeting people and getting referrals," says Stoltman. She also serves on several other boards, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Mercer County and the Cultural Services Commission of Hamilton. "These are also things I do to give back to the community, but also good exposure for my business."

Like her fellow entrepreneurs, Stoltman has never spent time thinking about being a woman in business. "When I started my business, I didn't think, 'I'm a woman, I should be doing certain things,' I just said, 'I'm a business owner and need to be doing certain things,'" she says. "But it's also nice to have the support of other women who are running businesses." That she gets from the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners. She's also co-chair of the Chamber's Women in Business Committee.

For Stoltman the best thing about being a sole entrepreneur is the ability to control her own destiny even though it's a juggling act. "You constantly have to be doing business development and that's a challenge for any business owner—the balance between how much time you spend meeting the needs of current clients while developing new ones."

Starting Out

Susan Colket is a newbie to the world of sole entrepreneurship, launching her business, Organized by Desire, in early 2006 after a dream job working for a startup productivity training company ended because of an acquisition. "It was a great place to work and people appreciated me

more than probably any other place I ever worked, but after the company was sold, I thought, 'I want something different,'" recalls Colket.

The realization that it would be extremely difficult to find an equally satisfying work environment was the inspira-



Organized by Desire's Susan Colket

tion for starting Organized by Desire where Colket helps professional women organize their personal and professional lives.

Colket makes it clear that her business isn't focused on cleaning up piles of stuff, but bringing a sense of order to her client's lives. "I work with professional women who've been organized or who have moved, gotten married, had children, retired, been downsized, whatever, and had life changes and whatever systems they had in place just don't work anymore," she explains.

It's only been a year, but so far it seems to be working. "I've been really lucky to work with people who are willing to invest the time and money because they want to live differently," says Colket. "One of the most important reasons to be organized is so you can do something else. Being organized just makes it easy."

It's been a huge challenge and Colket has no problem identifying the toughest. "The biggest challenge is facing all the issues that come up and taking them on one by one and having the courage to do that because there's nobody motivating you but you."

The past year has been spent taking what Colket has learned in previous positions and supplementing that with further education, most notably a marketing course for service professionals, which has been helpful for defining exactly what it is she does.

As she learned in the course, there are people who you were meant to serve and people who you do your best work with

and you need to figure out who they are so when you talk to them, there's a connect," she explains. "We all know what it's like to work with people we don't want to work with. It's a drag. The biggest challenge is defining what I do and who do I help and how can I find the best match."

So far networking and referrals have been the best tactics for finding clients. She expects to join the Mercer County Chamber of Commerce this year.

It may sound like pie in the sky but Colket concurs with everyone else when asked, what's the best thing about doing what she's doing now? "The freedom and flexibility to do work that I love to do and doing something that makes a difference for other people."

And has being a woman made a difference other than the fact that her clients are women? No, not at all.

The Right Time

Robin Fogel launched her consulting and coaching business, Robin Fogel & Associates, in 2000. Numerous sole entrepreneurs share her inspiration. "I was at a point in my life where I wanted to work for myself and it seemed like the right time," says Fogel. Growing up in an entrepreneurial family also provided inspiration, as both of her parents were business owners.

Fogel coaches folks looking to advance in their careers or who are interested in making a career change. She also offers executive coaching and consulting for not for profits and universities.

One of the biggest challenges Fogel



Robin Fogel of Robin Fogel & Associates

faced when starting out was learning how to do things herself. "I used to work in an office with a lot of support staff and there were things I had to learn to do that I hadn't really thought about," says Fogel.

Although Fogel works alone she finds herself involved from time to time on large

projects where she brings in other consultants. "One of the most important strategies is to have a group of colleagues you can partner with on various projects," she says. They, in turn, subcontract Fogel's services when they need additional expertise on big projects.

This also provides Fogel with colleagues with whom she could brainstorm when necessary. "The number one thing I would say to anybody who is on their own is to create your own informal network—some people call it a board of directors—of colleagues you can bounce things off," recommends Fogel.

Although much of Fogel's initial business came through referrals from people she's worked with before and a lot that she still does, she understood early on that she needed much more than referrals to sustain her business. That's one of the reasons she's a member of The Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce, The New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners, and The Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce. In addition, she writes a quarterly column for the Association of Professional Insurance Women as well as her own monthly newsletter that she e-mails to clients around the country. Also key to raising her profile is public speaking, something she would never have thought she'd have been comfortable doing when first starting out.

When making the transition from employee to entrepreneur Fogel had to get used to the fact that the days of getting a steady paycheck were over. "I think that's a good thing because it keeps you on your toes," she says while acknowledging that there's been some anxiety over whether this is going to be a good month or a bad month. "But I don't really think about that as much anymore," she says. "The flip side is I don't know if I'd be a good employee any more. I'm sure I would, but I'm used to my independence."

Fogel doesn't think her sex has been a hindrance or a help in the business world. It's just business. "The challenges women business owners face are the same challenges male business owners face," says Fogel. "We want our business to be a success, just like they want their's to be a success."

A Juggling Act

Pamela Pruitt has a knack for dispensing sound advice to friends and associates. It's a knack she's cultivated over the years while working at an array of jobs from assistant to the director of casting at CBS, assisting on such programs as The Mary Tyler Moore Show and The Bob Newhart

Show; lyricist at Motown records (she wrote the lyrics to Smokey Robinson's hit, "Baby Come Close"); 18 years doing marketing, sales, and training for Delta Airlines; followed by positions in radio, including her current position as vice president of business development at WIMG AM 1300 in Trenton. She's also the host of the WIMG AM 1300/WZBN-TV25 Women to Women simulcast. She's a juggler too, juggling her WIMG gig along with a host of extracurricular activities and her own business, The Next Level Consulting.

Pruitt launched her business in 2004 when she realized folks were always asking her for advice. "I'm passionate about my feelings and when someone asks for my opinion, I want to give them the best possible advice," says Pruitt.

Her position with WIMG was the springboard. "When I went out on behalf of WIMG and people wanted my advice, I'd say, 'I don't give free advice. I'll give you all the advice you need when we're talking about WIMG and your marketing needs, but tomorrow if you want my advice, you need to hire me.'" That advice is now dispensed in workshops and seminars on etiquette, the art of conversation, networking skills, and customer service. Pruitt also does keynote addresses, prelim-

inary event planning, marketing campaigns, and project development. There's really not all that much that she doesn't do.



Pamela Pruitt of The Next Level Consulting

Pruitt says she's not looking to break the bank. "If I were 10 or 20 years younger, I would be more aggressive." No matter, she's keeping herself more than busy doing what she loves. Early mornings, late afternoons and evenings are spent on her consulting business while the core of the day is reserved for WIMG.

Most of her clients learn about her services via word of mouth or through her many extracurricular activities. Pruitt's

husband is president of Thomas Edison State College and she serves on the Spouse's Committee for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. She's also on the Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce and various boards, including the Trenton Public Education Foundation where she's president. She occasionally does pro bono workshops in the hope they'll lead to paid workshops.

When asked if she gives any thought to being a woman business owner, Pruitt answers in the affirmative. She admits to wondering what it'd be like if she were starting a business and didn't have another breadwinner in the house or what it would be like if she were doing this as a single woman. "I think about how this would compare to a man," she reveals. "I have a colleague on a board that I compare myself to because he's building his company and I wonder how many women have that same ambition."

For Pruitt, the best thing about doing her own thing is the flexibility. But there's also a sense of accomplishment from seeing others benefit from her services and her advice "All the years of doing for others and learning from my other employment, I'm able to give back, and the reward is so much more personable and intimate," she says. ■

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