

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

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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