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Becoming the Boss

By [TINA KELLEY](#)

FOR 10 years Lisa Krizner-George had worked as a draper, making costumes for Broadway shows like “Wicked,” “Hairspray” and “Oklahoma!” She took sketches from designers and turned fantasies into fabric. But becoming a designer herself would have required an extra degree and starting over in the kind of company where she worked.

“It was something I’d always dreamed of,” said Ms. Krizner-George, 42. “I really wanted to get back into designing.”

So Vanilla Pink was born, in January 2007, six months after her son, Graeme.

Ms. Krizner-George works in a studio in her garage in Bloomfield, designing custom bridal dresses and evening wear, first fashioning them in muslin, then with real fabric, allowing for several fittings and revisions at the customer’s request.

She enjoys being up to her elbows in duchess satin, silk gazar or chiffon, on her own terms, even though her business is not yet profitable.

“I like being in charge of my days, and where I want to take my business, and not having to ask for time off or anything like that,” she said. “With a child at home, it’s so great.”

Then again, she said: “The worst is when I’m right in the thick of working on an idea for a dress and then I hear the cry on the baby monitor. Nap time is over!”

For women who want flexible hours, autonomy, and the chance to profit from ideas their corporate bosses often overlook, nap time is very much over.

The New York metropolitan area has more than a half million businesses owned by women, employing 533,437 people. These businesses have brought in \$93 million in receipts this year, according to the Center for Women’s Business Research, in Washington.

For years, women have been twice as likely as men to start their own businesses. And even though the current economic downturn has made credit even harder to come by for small-business owners, particularly women, since 2002 there has been an 8.9 percent increase in the number of businesses owned by women, a 2.3 percent increase in employees of companies owned by women, and a 16.6 percent increase in receipts at such companies, according to the women’s business research center.

For many female entrepreneurs, necessity is the mother of their venture. Take Carla Schneider, 40, of

Orange, Conn., whose product, the WubbaNub, a silicon pacifier with a small stuffed animal attached, has been used in neonatal intensive care units and by mothers of fussy babies around the country.

Ms. Schneider invented it during the first family vacation that she and her husband, Bret, took with their son, also Bret, now 9. Bret, 3 months old at the time, would sleep only with a pacifier in his mouth, but it kept falling out. So she sewed it onto a stuffed animal that Bret liked to cling to, and it stayed put.

“I got stopped on the street numerous times for a couple months after that, so I basically kind of took the ball and ran with it,” said Ms. Schneider, a former special education teacher who followed in the entrepreneurial footsteps of her mother, who runs a nonprofit agency.

Ms. Schneider, who works out of her home, named her product the WubbaNub, after her favorite stuffed dog from childhood. After selling enough WubbaNubs wholesale (they retail for \$11.95), her eight-year-old company is now profitable.

“Last year we tripled our revenue, so we are in the six figures, over half a million at this point and climbing,” she said.

Nationally, more women-owned businesses resemble Ms. Krizner-George’s than Ms. Schneider’s in scale. According to 2002 census figures, nearly half of companies owned by women have less than \$10,000 in annual revenues, compared with one-third of all privately held businesses. But several organizations are trying to address that discrepancy by helping women expand their businesses.

Soon after Stacey Smith and Linda Shapiro, friends on Long Island, had their first babies, they found that their frequent discussions revolved more around what they needed for their start-up businesses than for their little start-up humans. (Ms. Smith had begun creating handmade invitations, and Ms. Shapiro was selling children’s clothing and accessories.)

In 2005, they started what became the Hybrid Mom Consulting and Media Group, a service that uses the professional talents of women like themselves to help mompreneurs, as some call them, start new businesses. Their specialists work flexible hours, helping start-ups with Web site development, marketing and public relations.

“I don’t have to go work for a corporate environment, with its very rigid time format, where I’m not being able to be home when I’m needed to be, for my kids,” said Ms. Smith, who is based in St. James and has a son, 6, and a daughter, 3. The business made \$350,000 last year, Ms. Smith said.

As Ms. Smith helps other women share their expertise and enjoy the same flexibility she does, she can also speak frankly about the realities of entrepreneurship.

“A lot of sacrifice goes into it,” she said. “The laundry, when it’s done, is not folded immediately, and gets very, very wrinkly. Dinner is not necessarily gourmet. You get one-pan wonders and call it a day.”

While many people end work at regular hours, many entrepreneurs don’t have that luxury.

“Five p.m. is the end of the day? What, are you kidding me?” Ms. Smith said. “Five o’clock is my lunch hour.”

She takes time off to have dinner and to put her children to bed, then goes back to working.

On a national level, a nonprofit provider of online business loans for women called Count Me In for Women's Economic Independence sponsors a competition for entrepreneurs who are women and who want to reach the \$1 million annual revenue mark. Count Me In wants one million women to reach that goal by 2010.

In the contest, known as Make Mine a Million \$ Business, finalists prepare a three-minute pitch, for an audience of budding entrepreneurs and a panel of judges, in hopes of winning coaching, help with raising capital and networking activities.

In the recent competition in Newark on June 3, Count Me In's founder and chief executive, Nell Merlino, 55, paused to talk about how it can be hard for women to raise capital in the current market.

"I think there's a correction going on," said Ms. Merlino, who said that 650 used to be considered a decent credit score, but that banks now want 750. "Companies got so comfortable with the subprime situation, but I think now they're looking much more carefully at credit scores."

Julie R. Weeks, 50, president of Womenable, a consulting firm in Empire, Mich., focusing on female entrepreneurs, said the difficulty of securing money particularly hits women-owned businesses that are established and hoping to expand.

"The money is not so scarce for those who are starting their businesses, but it's more so for growth capital," she said.

But Ms. Merlino, who worked with the Ms. Foundation to popularize Take Our Daughters to Work Day, is not discouraged about the availability of capital. People who have great ideas and well-developed business plans are generally not being turned down for money, she said.

The day after the conference, when many of the winners were still networking, Elizabeth Perelstein, president of a business called School Choice International, was helping her 20-year-old son, David, move from a dorm to a house. "He has a 103-degree fever," she said. "It's O.K. to take a day off and help them when they're sick."

A former deputy principal at a public grade school in Armonk, N.Y., and a former education board member in Rye Neck, Ms. Perelstein, 52, started her business 10 years ago, soon after her family relocated to London. She had enrolled her two children at the American school there, but noticed a need for someone local to counsel expatriates about choosing schools.

Her business, now based in White Plains, has grown to include boarding-school searches and the development of a high school in Manhattan for British expatriates. It employs 90 consultants in 50 locations, including India and China. She won a Make Mine a Million contest in 2006.

"It was pivotal for me," she said, explaining how she learned the value of looking regularly at her financial statements, from a woman she met through the program, a plumber turned consultant.

"For a lot of women, it's very awkward for us to think about money, to talk about money, to act as though we are motivated by money," said Ms. Perelstein, who anticipates revenue of \$1.8 million this year.

Maureen Borzacchiello, chief executive of Creative Display Solutions, which makes displays for trade shows, “off-ramped,” as she called it, from a corporate job in the same industry about seven years ago.

“I really wanted to take control over my own destiny, and I wanted flexibility and options,” said Ms. Borzacchiello, 39, of West Hempstead, N.Y. “I knew I wanted to start a family at some point in the near future, and I really just decided it was time to create a new path.”

She won a Make Mine a Million award during her company’s first year, 2005, reached \$1 million in revenue in 2006, and is projecting 2008 revenue of \$3 million.

The Newark conference included, for the first time, a seminar for the daughters of women who are entrepreneurs. (There appears to be a genetic marker for starting a business.) Lindsey Pollak, 33, a New York City author who specializes in career advice and women’s issues, was the speaker at the Make My Daughters a Million seminar. She recalled having her own business card when she was 9 and helping with her mother’s decorative egg and jewelry business.

In introducing herself, one person attending, Melissa Longman, 13, of Frenchtown, said she and her best friend had a five-year-old beading business with “revenues of \$350 so far, I think.” Melissa, who had a business card and said she kept the e-mail addresses of all her customers, attended the event with her mother, Chrysanthe Longman, 43, who works at a graphics company in Hillsborough.

Ms. Merlino said that while most entrepreneurs in the program start their businesses after they have had children, younger women, especially daughters of entrepreneurs, can benefit from learning business skills early.

“We wanted to tell them, when they’re thinking about what they’ll be studying in high school and college, to know about the steps to take to start their own businesses, instead of going to work for somebody,” Ms. Merlino said. “Many wish they’d started their businesses sooner.”

Take Nadine Vogel, 44, of Mendham, whose convincing pitch tipped the applause meter and made her a winner. She runs a consulting firm that encourages corporations to market products to people with disabled family members and employ people with disabilities

“One day I realized I had been building businesses all along, but they were for my employer,” Ms. Vogel said. “I realized too that nobody out there is doing what I do, and somebody needs to work for the long-term benefits and to provide for people like my kids, so they can be seen as consumers and people with money, and employees. And if they’re not going to do it, I’m going to.”

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