Something clicked in business niche
Local entrepreneurs take a leap, turn their passion sometimes into a profit

BY CINDY FREE-FETTY
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A few years ago, you’d find Happy Valley’s Amber Wilson at a spring T-ball game somewhere in Clackamas, shooting photos of her son, Ethan Wilson sliding into first base.

Wilson took photos mostly for fun. Then friends started asking the mother of two to take more formal portraits and to photograph special events.

Something clicked, and Wilson, like so many small-business people across the county, turned a hobby into a home-based business.

It’s a similar story for Nohora Lambert of Oregon City, who grew up in Colombia and was surrounded by parties, decorations, cakes and people, thanks in part to her mother who was an event planner.

She took a cake decoration class and put her new skills to work baking cakes for family, friends, and, eventually, customers of her tiny business, Norhora’s Cakes.

People across Clackamas County are learning the ropes of a new home-based business, propelled sometimes by layoffs, or as a way for a stay-at-home mom who has a skill or a passion to turn it into a money-making opportunity.

“This is the best time to start a small business,” said Rob Campbell, an instructor and business counselor for the Small Business Development Center at Clackamas Community College.

“In this down economy, there is a realization that it’s the small businesses that are the economic engine. They create more jobs and hire more people within the United States than anyone. There is more access to low-cost technology and bandwidth, and there is a real ability for a small business owner to succeed than ever before.”

Campbell said there are two indicators of when someone is ready. “First, you have to be passionate about the work you want to do, and second, people you know will tell you to think about doing it as a business.”

One of the biggest misconceptions, he warned, “is that you don’t want to take what you’re passionate about and turn it into something you dread doing every day. Don’t ruin your hobby!”

One of the main things you would learn in one of Campbell’s classes at the SBDC is that your business should bring you “joy and wealth.”

Wilson and Lambert are two Clackamas County home-business owners who took the leap.

‘Likes’ like wildfire
Wilson’s friends could always count on seeing her at birthday parties, taking photos of kids enjoying
the festivities. She would often post photos on Facebook and the “likes” started hitting like wildfire.

But after more friends starting asking Wilson to take family and party photos, she wondered if her passion for photography could support her lifestyle needs.

“The best part about my photography is that I love it,” Wilson said. “It’s something I get to work around being a mom and a wife, and what I provide makes people really happy. And now I can make money doing what I love, but that wasn’t always the case.”

With technology, Wilson was able to post her photos on her Facebook page, which she said has been the best advertising for her business.

“At first, I started taking photos of friends for free,” said Wilson.

But as people began encouraging her work, they insisted on paying a little. With the money, Wilson began purchasing equipment, like a better camera and editing software.

“I think people need to take the money they earn early on and slowly put in into their image, their branding, equipment, taking a class, whatever they can to add to their experience of having a business,” said Wilson.

But, she is quick to point out that they “shouldn’t start relying on the income before their business is in place. People have to give themselves time so they don’t bite off more than they can chew. Time so they can be professional.”

She also took a photography class at Clackamas Community College, and relied heavily on Internet based tutorials to fine-tune her skills.

“YouTube is one of the best free resources out there for tutorials on whatever someone wants to learn,” she added.

**A model as old as time**

As Wilson’s referral base starting growing, she knew she needed to come up with a plan. Like many entrepreneurs, she was hesitant about taking the leap and making her business lucrative enough that it would allow her to not have to go back to a corporate job.

“I created a business plan that is as old as time,” she said. “I knew I should keep my prices in line with the economy. I knew I had to know what my bottom line was, but I wanted people to know they were getting a good deal.”

By utilizing local resources such as the SBDC and state websites, Wilson was able to gather the guidelines for starting this type of business.

“I had to cover my bases, which included things like licenses, insurance, waivers needed and accounting software,” said Wilson.

But this was the year Wilson knew she could take the leap.

“Everything is in line. It works for my family, I know I’m good at this and I enjoy it. The biggest thing is that it’s working according to my business plan. I can actually make money now, and my customers are really happy.”

**Nohora’s Cakes, Oregon City**

Born in Colombia and raised by an event-planner mother, Lambert grew up surrounded by parties, decorations, cakes and people.

“My family in Colombia exceeds over 150 people,” said Lambert.

“When I came to the United States to learn English, I was very alone.”

After meeting her husband, Mike Lambert, and having her first child, Lambert knew she was probably
not going back to work, or to her big Colombian family.

“I would be at home with our baby, with the most supportive husband, but I was lonely. I loved watching the cake competition shows on TV and thought, ‘I can do that,’” said Lambert.

With her husband’s encouragement, Lambert enrolled in a cake decorating class at Michael’s Crafts.

“It was more of a way I could meet friends with similar interests, but also learn a craft I had been raised around,” said Lambert.

Three years ago, Lambert made her first cake for her daughter’s birthday, and it took her 12 hours.

“Now the same cake would take me five. Michael’s is like my home away from home now,” she said.

‘Snowball’ effect of growth

When friends came to her daughter’s party, they raved about the cake and wanted to know who made it. “When they realized it was her, ‘the whole thing snowballed,’” said Lambert.

“Instead of birthday gifts at parties, I would offer to make a cake or cupcakes based on their party theme.”

When their friends would come, they would see the cake and want Lambert to do one for them. Ever since, her business has been strictly referral and word of mouth.

“Facebook is such an easy way to spread the word through a photo portfolio.”

And, like Wilson, “I did a lot of free cakes in order to learn more and grow my business.”

Set yourself apart

“The key to my success is keeping my prices lower and trying to set myself apart from the competition,” Lambert said.

When she started, Lambert was mixing her batters and frostings with a “$15 hand mixer.” As her business grew, she started investing in equipment such as a commercial mixer, refrigerators, tools, and also started perfecting her recipes.

“Everything I do is homemade and handmade,” Lambert said. “Every part of my cakes is edible — even the little cake toppers, and all the decorations.

“I never knew this could turn into a business. For me to take this life-changing leap, I had to feel the passion.”

Her advice to others thinking of taking the leap is to “sit and give yourself time to think about what you are good at, what you can commit to with your other obligations in life and know what your sacrifices might be.”

For her, the sacrifice is the finished product, as she recently learned the hard way.

“I had spent hours making these little doll cake pops for a party I was invited to. The hair on these dolls was a challenge; getting each little frosting curl placed on the cake pop just right. And then at the party I watched all the kids just eat them so fast, faces full of frosting. I had to turn away,” said Lambert.

The response of the customer is worth it for her. “I love hearing ‘good job, love it, keep doing it.’ And now I can actually make money too.”

Fast Facts

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Specialties: family, newborn, seniors, natural light photography, specializes with kids, will travel by request

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