

Meet Kristi Thomas

Isn't it amazing how the so-called little things in life often become big business ideas?

Take Kristi Thomas, who was trying to figure out how to ease her daughter's homesickness during the school day. Her solution? Thomas started doodling and writing notes on her first-grader's lunch bags.

Before she knew it, their popularity led her to launch Lunchology (www.lunchology.com), which is morphing boring brown lunch bags into something more exciting, with fun artwork, puzzles, brainteasers, trivia, and notes of love and inspiration. Lunchology now offers more than 1000 different themed lunch bags, sold online and in about 120 upscale stores nationwide.

Sandwich, Apple, Cookie... and a Helping of Fun and Love,

"My daughter was experiencing separation anxiety, which started rearing its ugly head late, in the first and second grade. She was feeling angst about being away from home and separated from mom and dad. We tried a number of things to help her cope and get through the day.

"Originally I was sending her notes in her packed lunch, but they were running up my bill at the Hallmark store. I began to see her lunch bags as a blank canvas. Sometimes my messages to her included encouraging words, letting her know that mom and dad were thinking of her. Sometimes they would suggest something that she needed to remember to do. I started to create little phrases like 'Be a friend to someone today,' or 'What's the greatest thing that you learned today? I'll want you to share it with me when you get home.' Instead of being weepy, she was motivated to do something."

Unexpected Popularity

"Peers in her class started retrieving the bags out of the garbage, approaching her and asking, "Who drew your bag?" which opened up a way for my daughter to engage with her peers in a way she hadn't before. We had a whole class of 1st and 2nd graders who wanted the bags for themselves. Parents called and asked if I could make sets for their children, too."

Patenting and Protecting Her Idea

"I approached a friend who's a savvy biz woman and told her about my idea to create these bags for kids. She encouraged me to see a patent attorney. The first firm that I approached turned me away. After our conversation, it was clear to me that this male team probably never packed a lunch in their life or they just didn't



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get it. They didn't have the same vision as I did for the product. It took me a while to muster the courage to approach another patent attorney, a woman, and her response was completely different. She could see what I could see.

"Right now I have patent pending status on one patent and several others in the works. I'm hoping of those that we're submitting, one will be a barrier of entry for other firms. My attorney suggested other things to do that would be barriers to entry - copyrighting the text, copyrighting the artwork and trademarking the name."

Where on Earth Is An Affordable Warehouse?

"I started Lunchology in my basement, but it became apparent to me very quickly that we needed to move out of this meager 500 square feet, to be able to acquire more printers, bring on more folks to help and to build an inventory to meet the growing demand from consumers. I was looking for warehouse space, but everything was way outside of my price range.

"So Lunchology has partnered with Weaver Industries, a channel through which people who have mental or emotional handicaps can find work. Weaver Industries director said, "Let's bring you guys into our warehouse, in a reverse integration of Lunchology staff working side by side with Weaver's clients. "

Being Supermom and Saleswoman

"Most of what I have done so far has been getting the ear of buyers at stores. I fly out to their location, I talk about the product, negotiate terms, and most of time I leave with a signed contract.

"Every day is about juggling. I joke that some days are like juggling tennis balls, and some days are like juggling bowling balls. I have my PDA and take cell phone calls on the fly. I still manage to host a study group at my daughter's school every Monday. Being available to her is paramount to everything else. Each day, I get her to school, commute about 50 minutes, and travel back to my warehouse, where I spend the day filling orders and dialoguing with my print team. "

Support of a Loving Husband

"I saw a TV show the other night about Julia Child. Her husband was always part of building her up, supporting her, even creating her TV Show, but you never saw his face. That's my husband, Chris.

"My husband is a voice and data engineer by trade. He helped me to come up with printing solutions, configure my servers, identify contractors we can plug into - he makes sure all the pieces of our technology fly. I have an idea. He makes it happen. He's been a great support - never a naysayer. He wasn't reluctant to invest the money we had put aside to build a home. "

First Career: Family Counseling

"I went to the University of Akron and graduated with dual majors in education and community counseling psychology. The bulk of my post-graduate work was treating families where there had been some kind of sexual offense.

"I really burned out quick as a therapist. This type of work is very punitive and at times I felt like I was working in a MASH unit. When called to court to give expert testimony, it was hard seeing children humiliated on the stand and witnessing offenders plea bargain to lesser offenses. I also completely disagree with children having to face their offender in counseling. "

Overcoming A Tumultuous Childhood

"I immersed myself in that line of work because of my own tumultuous upbringing - there was a lot of dysfunction in my family. I wanted to help other children to manage through the system and get help. But the more I did it, the more I realized the system is screwed up. I'm in a state where the goal is reunification of families - and that doesn't work for me. I saw many families being reunified after treatment only to see recidivism go through the roof.

"After having Madison, my objectivity was gone. One offense is too many. Every perpetrator needs to be locked up. I felt that rehabilitation wasn't effective. "

Greatest Success

"My life is filled with little success stories. Coming from a broken home, the fact that I have been able to rear an intact, healthy fami... that is my greatest success story. Others include being the first person in my family to graduate from college and graduate school. Education was a savior to me. I even received full scholarships to two colleges. "

Greatest Challenge

"Managing Lunchology's rapid growth. I'm finding people who have very good heads on their shoulders who are willing to help. This year is about continuing to find great people so we can ride this momentum to get a sales force in place and keep up with production. I'm flying to New York to meet with a packaging and collating company so that when a big box store says OK, then I'm ready. "

Words of Advice – How to Re-Energize

"There have been so many days when I have been so tired. When you're starting a business by yourself, you are going to have times when you feel like you can't take one more step forward. When you're feeling like that, you need to look over your shoulder and see how far you've come. It will give you the energy you need to

take the next step. "

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