

entrepreneurs

# Startup Stories

**Four entrepreneurs dish on what it takes to launch a company.**

BY ELA SCHWARTZ



**W**hat does it take to successfully launch your own company? NAFE spoke with four entrepreneurs: two are just starting out; two have been in business for over 10 years. Their companies may be different, but what they share is intelligence, creativity, passion, solid business skills, and proof that as Edison said, “Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.”

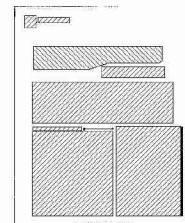
## REVOLUTIONIZING HISTORY

**AS A CHILD,** Theresa Carter loved history. “In elementary school, I read just about every biography in the library,” she says. But her parents encouraged her to major in business rather than liberal arts. Carter got an MBA and joined Coca-Cola, working her way up to senior brand manager of Diet Coke.

However, she became dismayed by her lack of control over the brand and distressed by how her four children were more interested in reading about fantasy superheroes than historical figures. “I wanted to make kids as excited about Abraham Lincoln and Amelia Earhart as they were about Power Rangers and Spider Man,” she says.

Carter decided to form a company that would create DVDs telling the stories of real-life American heroes in an action-adventure format. She found two angel investors but then had a change of heart. “I would have the money, but I’d give up ownership and control,” she explains. “I talked to other entrepreneurs who said that they regretted giving their companies away at the lowest point of valuation.” She decided instead to invest her own \$50,000 savings into book publishing and expand into DVDs and multimedia later on.

AmeriTales launched in November 2007 with its first book, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forest of Little Pigeon Creek*, written by Carter herself. New books on Amelia Earhart and Thomas Edison are due out this year. The books are sold on AmeriTales.com, Amazon.com, and Borders.com, and Carter is working on getting product into bookstores as well as reaching out to schools and libraries.



# THERESA CARTER

Founder  
AmeriTales Entertainment LLC  
San Diego, California

## BUSINESS ADVICE

"Start a business you feel passionate about. If it's your passion, the level of sacrifice and dedication will be easier to bear."

## LIFE MOTTO

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure... And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."

—Nelson Mandela

## PET PEEVE

"Negativity... people telling me I'll never be able to accomplish something."

## BACK TO SCHOOL

**ROSHELLE JONES-HIRVONEN ALWAYS** loved school. She was the first person from her family to attend college (on a basketball scholarship). She got a master's degree in leisure services and studies and recreation management and began working in her field, taking jobs such as campus recreation director, before taking time to travel.

She then switched gears and went into customer service, eventually ending up as VP of member services for eDiets.com.

In her spare time, Jones-Hirvonen enjoyed organizing parties: "I'm always thinking about different ways to make a present or party special," she explains. When a friend was looking for a creative way to fasten a card to a liquor bottle, Jones attached the card with Mardi Gras beads, which sparked the idea for SparklingCards.com, a web site that sells cards that tie onto bottles and narrow vases.

"The idea was the easiest thing to come up," says Jones-Hirvonen, adding that she also had to apply for a patent and source product. She used \$30,000 of her savings to fund the project in 2005 and says the site is now breaking even.

With one web site under her belt, her thoughts turned back to her first love—school—and she started thinking about a web site that would offer college students the information and resources they would need in their new schools and towns. She formed partnerships with Clickability.com, CableOrganizer.com and others, and Welcome2college.com launched in 2007. She plans to bring in more advertisers and sponsors in the future.

Jones-Hirvonen continues to do consulting work to pay the bills, and while she hires freelancers, she is happy to be a one-woman show.





**President/Owner**  
**Sparklingcards.com and**  
**Welcome2college.com**

Coconut Creek, Florida

**BUSINESS ADVICE**

"Don't immediately quit your day job. You may think you just put up a site and people will come, but it takes time."

**LIFE MOTTO**

"Like most aspiring entrepreneurs, I go to work each day for someone else, since my paycheck enables me to follow my entrepreneur aspirations. But that's just what I do—it's not what I am. What I am is an entrepreneur."

**PET PEEVE**

"Rudeness—those who seem to go out of their way to put down and/or belittle others."

**ROSHELLE JONES-HIRVONEN**



## LEAVING A LARGER FOOTPRINT

**BARBARA THORNTON STARTED** in the urban policy field, then took a few years off to be a full-time parent. In the mid-1990s she decided to go back to school—this time to Harvard for her MBA.

A few things happened on her way to the corporate world. A high-powered mentor told her that companies wouldn't take a middle-aged woman seriously as an up-and-coming executive. As a science-fiction fan, she was captivated by the Internet and its business possibilities. And, as a woman who wears a size 11.5 shoe, she had the opportunity at a party to question a man who worked in the shoe industry about the dearth of styles in women's larger sizes. He fired back by asking her why, as a businesswoman, she wasn't doing something herself to fill the void.

Thornton decided to take him up on the challenge with a web site that would offer a range of shoe styles for the underserved market of women size 10 and over.

She put together a business plan and brought in a partner. After a few months, he told Thornton he had decided to retire. "I thought I couldn't go on, but he told me that

everybody can have a great idea but you have to decide if you're going to do it, if you're going to be a man or a mouse," she says.

But investors didn't exactly welcome her with open arms. "The attitude was, 'Oh, she just likes shoe shopping,'" she recalls. "And back in 1995, investors in New England just didn't get the Internet." Thornton soon determined that she wouldn't be taken seriously without a brick-and-mortar store, so she played along by using her \$125,000 investment to open both a store and a web site. The situation forced her to "spend way too much time on the store and not enough on the Internet," she says.

In 2005 she suffered another setback when software glitches that her provider didn't resolve caused her to lose online sales.

Fortunately, she's now on the right track—she closed the store last year, found a new software provider for her site, and "couldn't be more delighted."

"I love the fact that I did it," she says. "I love making complicated strategic, financial, and merchandising decisions, and really growing this business."

## BARBARA THORNTON

**Founder and president  
Designershoes.com**

Boston, Massachusetts

### BUSINESS ADVICE

"If you don't understand that vendors, investors, and staff are seeing you through a gender lens, you won't be able to manage strategically."

### BUSINESS MOTTO FOR OUR TEAM

"Never make a mistake. But if you make a mistake—fix it."

### PET PEEVE

"Shoe manufacturers who think there is no market for larger size shoes for women because they didn't sell any larger shoes last year... because they didn't make any larger size shoes the prior year."



## MAKING INROADS IN AUTISM

**JULIE AZUMA** GOT her start in apparel, working for 30 years as a designer, design director, and merchandiser for many well-known brands. But over the years she became disillusioned with an industry that valued youth over experience.

In 1994 Azuma's daughter Miranda was diagnosed with autism. Azuma found herself frustrated in her attempts to locate the specific toys and items therapists and parents use to work with autistic children, so she decided to start a one-stop shop for these educational materials.

Her first thought was to open a store, but one look at Manhattan's astronomical rents convinced her to go virtual. By doing business online, she was able to finance herself through her savings of \$40,000, spending slowly as the need rose on "filing as an S corporation, legal fees, web hosting fees, computers, an 800 line, a dedicated fax line, and finally, product." Sales started slowly—gross sales for the first six months were \$200—but steadily climbed; in three years DRL had a profit of approximately \$75,000 in sales volume, and sales for 2007 were \$2.1 million.

In 1998, Azuma asked a renowned psychologist if he had a book to sell. He had a manuscript but no publisher and asked if she'd be interested, and DRL Books was born. "We didn't know anything about publishing but learned quickly and have now printed the original book eight times," says Azuma.

It hasn't all been smooth sailing—not every book has been successful and Azuma learned early on that many of her potential customers still preferred ordering from a catalog, which led to her hastily putting one together and handling bulk mailings.

She sees her next challenge as getting more brand identification and is now working with a public relations person on that front. •



**President  
Different Roads to  
Learning, Inc. and  
DRL Books, Inc.**

Coconut Creek, Florida

**BUSINESS ADVICE**

"Don't quit your day job until you know that your new enterprise is going to

carry you through your daily needs. Then you can start thinking of larger goals."

**MOTTO**

"We believe in great customer service. So many parents and teachers of children with autism are under such great stress that we want them to always feel comfortable in contacting us with any issues, problems, or questions about product or in looking for other resources for their children."

**PET PEEVE**

"I really don't have one!"

**JULIE AZUMA**