

The Charlotte Observer

FEBRUARY 6, 2011



Jennifer Hecht, owner of the Sweet Magnolia Style boutique in Mooresville, works on a display. She quit her job as a teacher with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to pursue her dream of running her own shop. Her father and stepmother encouraged her.

EFF WILHELM - jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com

Some follow dreams despite tough economy

PEOPLE WITH NERVE, MOTIVATION LAUNCH THEIR OWN BUSINESSES

BY ELY PORTILLO
elyportillo@charlotteobserver.com

Uncertain economic times and high unemployment might make it seem like a bad time to start a business.

But the gloom isn't stopping everyone. Some people have always dreamed of owning their own shop.

Some want to control their own hours and schedule, tired of answering to a corporate boss.

Some around the area are even bold enough to walk away from a stable job, casting aside worries about the region's unemployment still stubbornly topping 10 percent.

More businesses opened last year in Mecklen-

burg County than in 2009, according to the Charlotte Chamber: 635 last year vs. 526 in 2009. Some say they're seeing more interest from workers who can't find employment anywhere else.

"No question, with the record unemployment, that's helping our lead flow," said Josh D'Agostino, in charge of finding candidates to open new franchises for NAPA Auto Parts. He was at last week's Business and Franchise Expo in Charlotte, which NAPA was attending for the first time. In 2010, inquiries about opening a NAPA franchise jumped 18 percent.

Here, three people share their stories and advice for anyone thinking about taking the leap themselves.

INSIDE, 2D



Jennifer Hecht, Robbie Jones, Samuel Batt tell their own stories about taking a chance.



Jennifer Hecht, Mooresville

Age: 32

Business: Sweet Magnolia Style boutique, 140 Marketplace Ave., Mooresville.

Background: Hecht spent eight years teaching at Charlotte-Mecklenburg elementary schools. She studied teaching in college and post-graduate studies, and though she liked her job, it wasn't her dream.

"If anyone ever asked me what my dream would be, it was to own my own boutique," she said.

Last year, her father and stepmother moved to the area and were looking for investment opportunities when they found a storefront opening up in a Mooresville shopping center.

Starting the business: Even with an appealing retail space, Hecht had doubts about quitting her job, with benefits and raises.

"I had my mom and my stepdad being the devil's advocate, being like, 'In this economy you're going to give up a job when people are losing their job?'" she said. "I had my dad saying, 'Go with it,'" she said. "I was having breakdowns, crying, because I was like, 'Oh my God, it really is all on me to make this decision.'"

But Hecht thought this was her one chance. So she and her stepmother, Barbara Hecht, pooled \$35,000 and headed to Manhattan to buy their starting inventory of designer dresses, jeans, shirts and accessories. They were helped by Jennifer Hecht's uncle, who owns a boutique in New York.

"It was a real adrenaline rush at first," Hecht said. "You don't even know how much you spent. You go to these vendors and just fill out forms - a grand, two grand."

Hecht had initially planned to keep her teaching job through this school year and run her business full-time once she had replenished her savings from a steady income. She soon decided, though, that being present at the boutique's start was too important to miss and resigned before the current school year.

"I was getting really stressed out about it," she said. "Who's there in the beginning is really important, because it's who people start to know."

Highs and lows: The best part so far has been walking into the store each morning and knowing that it belongs to her.

"When I come and get out of the car and open the door, sometimes I get goose bumps," Hecht said. "Because this is it. I'm doing what I always wanted to do."

There are sacrifices, though. She's given up most of her free time, either running the store or doing behind-the-scenes work after hours, such as entering her whole inventory in a website. There are also scary moments, like sitting in a store with no customers during the post-holiday lull, and watching how quickly most profits get plowed back into the store.

Her advice: "Go for it. If anyone's thinking about it and it's been their passion, go for it," she said. "Life is short."

Robbie Jones



Age: 53.

Business: HOODZ Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning, 11537 Corliss Ave., Charlotte.

Background: After 30 years working at a bottling company, Jones had risen to a senior executive position when another firm bought the company out.

"They laid off all the senior executives,"

Jones said. "I was sending out 20 to 25 resumes a day. I never thought I wouldn't get a job."

The seemingly endless search took a toll on Jones. "After you've been out of a job a while, you ask yourself all kinds of weird questions - 'Am I as good as I thought I was?'" he said.

When a franchise coach approached him after almost a year of searching, Jones was ready to listen.

Starting the business: Jones tapped his retirement fund to come up with the \$30,000 HOODZ requires to start a franchise cleaning restaurant stove hoods and exhaust system of grease. With grease buildups sometimes running as high as 35 pounds in a system, the work can be, for lack of a better word, yucky. He spent a week at their training facility in Michigan, then returned to Charlotte to hire two cleaning technicians and a salesperson, opening for business Dec. 3.

The business-to-business sales appealed to Jones, who thought that would be stronger in the current economy than a retail business. And HOODZ sells a necessary service for restaurants, so the market seemed stable.

"At my age, I didn't have time to build up a whole new business and rebuild my retirement fund," Jones said.

Highs and lows: Just being back to work after an exhausting and unproductive job search is the best part, Jones said.

"I can put all that energy into being productive," Jones said.

But the pressure of owning a business and taking responsibility for employees' livelihoods is a kind of responsibility Jones didn't have when he was working for someone else.

"It scares me every day," Jones said, "when I've gotta sit there and say, 'We've got to sell x number of jobs to make payroll.'"

Advice: Make sure you can deal with the stress.

"Be sure you want the responsibility," he said. "The responsibility of other families on your back every day, meeting a payroll, is not for everyone."

Samuel Batt

Age: 30.



Business: Four TCBY stores at area shopping centers, with a fifth opening next month.

Background: Batt was working as an information technology and management consultant at Accenture when his first son was born. While on paternity leave, Batt said, he realized he needed a job that allowed him to spend more time at home with his family and less time traveling to see clients.

"It's not a situation where I hated my job," Batt said. "I was traveling Monday through Thursday, and I didn't want to travel away from my family any more."

He thought about opening a restaurant, and gravitated to franchises because, aside from a high school stint at a bagel shop, Batt had no restaurant experience. Frozen yogurt was becoming popular again, and Batt had an idea - why not update one of his childhood favorites, TCBY, with a new, hipper self-serve model to compete with new chains like Pinkberry?

Starting the business: Quitting a steady job during historically bad economic times was one of his main worries. But his wife still works full-time from home, and Batt supplements his TCBY income by managing operations for his stepfather's company, which sells textiles to the government.

"We definitely had concerns," Batt said. His wife's job helped with insurance, though.

With the help of several local investors and his savings, Batt cobbled together TCBY's starting requirement of \$100,000 cash and approached the company to see if they wanted to go for his prototype.

Highs and lows: The unpredictability of retail sales can be stressful, Batt said, but that's also one of his favorite parts of the job.

"Even on the hottest and sunniest day, you can't promise you're going to have the sales," he said. "I think I like that. It keeps me on my toes, and challenges me."

And the best thing about Batt's new job: "We're doing well, expanding, and I'm able to sleep in my house at night."

His advice: "You've got to love what you're doing and what you're selling," Batt said.