

Entrepreneurial spirit sparks at an early age

By HEIDI PRESCOTT Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND
In the sixth grade, Joya Helmuth started a business she called Write-A-Mania. With calligraphy pens from an aunt, the teenager spent her free time printing poems, charging customers 7 cents a word.

"I had business cards and brochures, and I think the grade school even let me put up posters. Entrepreneurship runs in the family," says Helmuth, who today at 38 is still surrounded with pens, letterhead and stationery.

"For me to have my own business is a way of life."

That business is Spark Fine Stationery, located in an old firehouse on Hill Street near downtown South Bend. The front of the store focuses on retail, with journals, paper, and announcements.

"If you can find something I carry anywhere else, you *have* to tell me," the 38-year-old mother of two confides as she spins a greeting card rack inside her front door to show some unique lines.

But more than a third of her business is derived from wedding announcements, invitations, programs, placards and favor boxes that all appeal to her lifelong love of design. She also works on brochures, programs and other projects with the University of Notre Dame and Saint Mary's College.

Helmuth recently tweaked the name of the store — formerly Spark Design Studio — that she launched as a home-based business in 1998, to emphasize the retail as opposed to the design.

"There have been so many name changes and moves for this



Tribune Photo/PAUL RAKESTRAW

Joya Helmuth, owner of Spark Fine Stationery, poses for a photo in her store, which is located at 219 N. Hill St. in South Bend.

profile

business," she says, noting how Spark had been located in the Commerce Center when she still had a business partner, and William Street, before moving to Hill Street in March 2007.

"We've not gotten people in the door because they've thought we were an interior design business. I realized it was now or never."

She has taken a similar now-or-never position on being a champion for independent local businesses. If Helmuth's name or face look familiar, she has recently gotten some publicity for her work as the newly elected president of the board of directors for the local

nonprofit ShoLo.

This business alliance, which stands for "Shop Local," is about 75 members strong. The independent business owners — those unaffiliated with a franchise — who belong to the organization hope to spread the word about their uniqueness and importance.

"It is a way to help each other and bring awareness to the community about our businesses and how they add character, diversity and choices to our neighborhoods," says Helmuth.

"I think we really have something here," she adds about the effort shared with Rebecca Maalouf, of Camellia cosmetics, and Mark McDonnell, of LaSalle Grill.

That inner drive to take a stance and make a difference

comes from her parents, including her mom who spent years as an elected government leader in the Grand Rapids area. Her father, who is an accountant, supporter of the arts and architecture enthusiast, is also an inspiration.

"They always taught me it's easier to complain than to go out and fix something. They never just belonged to a church, they got involved," Helmuth says. "And I can't afford to sit back and hope someone walks in my door."

At the same time, this working mom struggles with the balancing act of running a business, helping to lead a community nonprofit, and raising a family.

Helmuth and her husband, Lamar, an Indiana State Police crime scene investigator, have two

children, Lea, 9, and Cory, 10.

"They know I struggle with balance between work and home, but they are learning that a business is a lot of hard work. I want to show them that you should love what you do. It's not as much about making money as it is enjoying what you do," she says. "They have so many options and could make their own job or career and forge a new path."

In the meantime, Helmuth hopes her stationery store continues to draw attention to what is becoming a forgotten art: letter writing.

She is emphasizing this objective through a new tag line for her business: "Leave a paper trail." It conveys her desire for people to write letters to family and friends and document their lives in journals. "If you

don't, what will your grandkids have? A stack of e-mails if you take the time to print them out?"

A box of handwritten letters sits on a bookshelf at Helmuth's home. She usually opens it when she is moving the fabric-covered box to clean. She loves reading the letters from her mom and dad, from friends, and from her husband when the couple were still dating.

She cherishes these personal notes, and hopes to inspire others to do the same.

"I love it when parents buy monogrammed stationery for their daughter or son as a wedding gift, because it's a way to continue that notion of leaving something handwritten behind."

This summer will bring a return to old-fashioned family vacations

Thanks to the recession, what's old is new again, at least when it comes to summer travel.

While fewer Americans say they'll take a trip this summer — 42 percent compared with 49 percent last year, according to a recent AP-GfK poll — more of them are traveling to tried-and-true destinations.

Tom Edgerton, owner of Edgerton's Travel Service, said more of his agency's clients indeed are interested in taking shorter and less expensive trips this summer.

"Not a lot of Europe," Edgerton said when talking about summer travel trends. "There is more of an interest in trips within the United States."

Not only is U.S. road travel less expensive, he said, it also allows consumers to avoid the hassles of airline travel these days.

Additionally, Edgerton said, his agency has had a lot of success with guided rail tours during the past few years.

"We'll be doing even more of these," he said. "It's travel the way it used to be. We do a lot of hand holding. No one misses a bus. And, we feed everyone a lot."

See TRAVEL/4



Travel flashback

By KIM KILBRIDE Tribune Staff Writer

Tom Edgerton, owner of Edgerton's Travel Service in Mishawaka, said he is seeing an increase in clients choosing shorter, less expensive trips within the U.S.

Tribune Photo/SANTIAGO FLORES

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