

Working Together, Apart

BY NICOLE ROSENLEAF RITTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE



Bozeman “mom-trepreneurs” find that cooperation and collaboration lead to greater success than does ruthless competition

Some might say that in today’s harsh economic climate, businesses have to be cutthroat just to survive. Dana Sorg and Amy Burk would take issue with that. The two local business owners and moms could be locking horns in competition, but they have instead forged a cooperative relationship, boosting each other up and growing their own separate businesses in the process. They trade childcare and market each other’s businesses, each serving as both informal business advisor and cheerleader for the other.

“It’s contrary to what everyone says women do and to what people expect,” Burk, mother of three and owner of the Dew Drop-In Childcare Center as well as a preschool and a children’s consignment shop, explains. “People expect us to be catty and undercut each other. I don’t see the point in that. There are so many ways we can help each other out, and then we both win.”

“It’s more natural to work together,” adds

Dana Sorg, left, and Amy Burk pose at Main Street Dance Theatre in Bozeman.

Sorg, a former professional dancer who owns the Main Street Dance Theatre and the Creative Arts Preschool and has two children.

Both Burk and Sorg emphasize the value of having another business owner and mom to talk with. “Sometimes, if I have a problem that I don’t know how to solve, she might have already faced something like that and have advice, or vice versa,” Burk explains. “Being able to bounce ideas off of each other is so important.”

Burk and Sorg aren’t the only Bozeman “mom-trepreneurs” who are trying friendly cooperation instead of rabid competition with good results. Kristin VanDeWalle and Priscilla Foster both make high-end albums suitable for displaying photos, and both depend on professional photographers as a primary market for their products. VanDeWalle, who owns ArtZ, makes her books from hand-cut leather, while Priscilla Foster — who owns and operates the downtown paper shop Ro Sham Bo

along with Priscilla Foster Handmade Books — uses custom fabrics.

Although their products are in direct competition, Foster and VanDeWalle — each of whom has two children — recently chose to pool their resources and share a booth at a photographers’ tradeshow in Las Vegas.

“We promoted both our own and each other’s businesses,” VanDeWalle notes. “It was totally unorthodox, and the crowd response at first was a little uneasy because it is such a competitive environment. But once we explained it, people thought it was a really cool and smart thing to do.”

They displayed their products in the same booth and even collaborated on a new product line that uses Foster’s fabric covers and ArtZ’s matted album pages. Since the show, they have continued to cross-market their respective businesses and to work together on a few joint products.

“It’s almost like being in business together — without having to be in business together,” Foster says with a smile.

“It seems like when people do this, it’s always a takeover or the preliminaries for becoming partners,” VanDeWalle adds. “This is more mutual admiration and desire to help each other out.”

STRIKING A BALANCE

All four women have the common bond of running a business while juggling family responsibilities. In the case of VanDeWalle and Foster, both have built their businesses — on an international scale — out of studios linked to their homes to allow a work-life balance.

VanDeWalle and her husband, architect Kenneth VanDeWalle, built their house in northeast Bozeman specifically to allow the two of them to work from home.

“We designed it to have our businesses and homes be connected and interactive,” she explains.

Foster’s studio, finished last summer near her home outside of Bozeman, has a playroom above it as well as an art center that her older son loves. “We definitely made our decisions on how we could incorporate the kids in the design of the studio,” she notes.

Sorg and Burk have also incorporated their kids into their work, but in their respective places of business since both operate preschools. In fact, Sorg explains that the bond between her and Burk — who are both divorced — stemmed largely from their both needing to create jobs that could accommodate their children.

“If you strip all of our businesses away, we’re both single moms who need to make ends meet but don’t want to sacrifice time with our kids,” she says.

Sometimes, Sorg adds, it just comes down to basics like that when it comes to cooperating as business owners and mothers. Real basics, in fact, as one of Sorg’s self-described “calamities” illustrates.

“We do two free library shows each year, dancing story times, and I’m always the narrator,” Sorg explains. When Sorg’s young daughter, who was in the audience, interrupted the play for problems that only a mother could solve, it was Burk who came to the rescue, stepping in and taking Sorg’s daughter to the bathroom. The show could go on.

“That is where our connection comes in,” Sorg laughs. “She takes my daughter potty so that I can do my job. Sometimes it just comes down to these necessities.”

All four women say that such bonds make it easier to be successful in both business and parenting, even when things get hectic. And given that they operate eight businesses among them, hectic happens.

“I like a little insanity,” Burk says. “Dana and I both get asked how we do it. I don’t know; it’s just my life.”

Nicole Rosenleaf Ritter is the managing editor of Business to Business and At Home.



Kristin VanDeWalle, left, and Priscilla Foster pose together at the VanDeWalle home in Bozeman.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Kristin VanDeWalle’s company, ArtZ, maintains a web presence at www.artzproducts.com or can be reached by phone at 586-8720.

Ro Sham Bo, Priscilla Foster’s retail shop, is located at 17 S. Tracy Ave. in downtown Bozeman or on the web at

www.roshambomt.com. The phone number is 582-7584. Priscilla Foster Handmade Books can be seen at www.priscillafoster.com.

Dana Sorg owns the Main Street Dance Theatre and Creative Arts Preschool, both at 2304 N. 7th Ave., Ste. C-3. Information can be found at www.mainstreetdancetheatre.com or by calling 587-7192.

Amy Burk owns the Dew Drop-In Childcare Center, the Dew Drop-In Preschool and the Dew Drop Resale Shoppe, all located 448 E. Main St., beneath Fleet Feet. The childcare and preschool have a website at www.dewdropinchildcare.com or can be reached by phone at 585-1108. The resale shop’s site is www.dewdropresaleshoppe.com. The phone number is 585-5670.