

Taking care of business



Ellen Roseman

There's nothing like a real-life story of triumph and overcoming barriers. And business is the theatre in which these dramas are often played out.

Last week, the Rotman Canadian Woman Entrepreneur of the Year awards gave national recognition to female business owners. Three of the five winners came from the Toronto area.

As a frequent guest at the awards dinner, I never fail to be impressed by how hard these women work to achieve their success and how many sacrifices they make along the way.

Joanne Papari-Doulaverakis told a story about how she came home from the office one day at 5.30 p.m. Her young son kept asking if she was sick.

No, she replied, I'm fine. Why do you ask?

"Because you've never here in the daylight," her son replied.

Papari-Doulaverakis invited her husband and two children to join her on the stage, an acknowledgement of how they contributed to her award.

Born and raised in Greece, she moved to Canada in 1977 to study chemical engineering at

the University of Windsor. She was hired as a chemical sales representative at Rochester Midland Corp. and worked her way up to become the top manager in Canada. In 1996, she started Biochem Environmental Solutions in Concord. It's in "the glamorous business of washroom hygiene," developing products such as waterless hand sanitizers, automatic faucets and flush valves and garbage dispensers that pop open at the press of a button.

She won an award for innovation, honouring her leadership in reducing the risk of bacteria and cross-contamination in public washrooms.

Marnie Walker started a school-bus company to transport handicapped children to schools, camps and special programs. This was a market no one else wanted to serve. From a fleet of eight buses in 1990, Student Express Ltd. has grown to 250 buses and annual revenue of \$10.3 million. The Richmond Hill company provides transportation under contract for four school boards in the Toronto area.

Walker has her own experience of disability, after a serious illness in her teens forced her to use canes and crutches for eight years.

Divorced, with no support from her family and no capital to start a business, she used her Visa card and a bank loan to finance her fleet of buses. And she didn't give up her day job for the

first five years.

Student Express made money right away and continues to generate better returns than large public competitors. Walker won an award for having a big impact on the local economy.

Patti Falus won a start-up award for her business, Barter Network Ltd., with 1,200 clients in Toronto.

Falus, who turns 41 today, learned about being an entrepreneur as a teenager, working with her uncle in his home-décor import business.

At 22, she bought a condominium and doubled her money in 10 months. She went on to buy, renovate and resell nine properties over the next 15 years. When her first child was born in 1992, she started the Wholesale Baby Connection, selling clothing through home parties. Facing a high-risk pregnancy with her second child, she could no longer organize parties.

What to do with the left-over merchandise? A cousin suggested liquidating it through a barter exchange.

Falus worked as a barter broker for five years before founding her own firm in 2000. The showroom on Eglinton Ave. E., near Yonge, is so crowded that she has bought a building.

Businesses trade with each other using barter dollars. The Canada Revenue Agency recognizes one barter dollar as equivalent to one cash dollar and requires sales and purchases to be reported for tax purposes in the

same way as cash sales and purchases.

"We're the opposite of the cash world, where you bust your behind to close the sale," she says.

"With us, the sale comes to you. We bring new business you don't have. But you have to focus on spending efficiently."

The top five choices for barter dollars: advertising, promotion, business expenses, travel and employee benefits. The category of benefits is the fastest growing, she says. Many small firms can no longer afford health insurance.

"We have dentists, massage therapy and alternative health of all kinds. It's a way for small businesses to offer benefits without going broke."

The only thing not for barter is the membership fee of \$299 that businesses pay to join.

Falus bought another barter network last year, bringing in new members in Ottawa and Montreal.

When accepting her award, she said: "What a great party. I hope you paid for it with barter."

For more information, check www.barternetwork.ca or call 1-866-362-2783.

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