

Who's the Boss?

Alumni entrepreneurs make it their business

Part One

By Daniel Murphy '97

Daniel Murphy '97 is a contributing editor at Rowan Magazine. He lives in Mount Laurel with his wife Susan Murphy '96.

Warm Welcome: Pineapple Hill Bed & Breakfast

Kathy Triolo '82 enjoys the benefits of working at home. Then again, Triolo doesn't have an ordinary home—or an ordinary job.

Triolo and her husband Cookie, a former Navy cook, always wanted to open their own business but weren't sure what that business would be. "As we looked at everything from bait and tackle shops to general stores, we realized that we enjoyed staying in bed and breakfasts along the way," said Triolo. "At that point it clicked. I knew we could run one with Cookie as the chef and me as the innkeeper. So we started looking for a B&B."

After searching up and down the East Coast, the couple found the perfect home just outside New Hope, Pennsylvania. Built in the 1790s, the four-bedroom farmhouse on the Delaware River had been abandoned by the previous owners and desperately needed restoration.

To help keep costs down, Triolo learned a lot of her handyman skills on the job.

"I learned how to tile, grout and hang wallpaper," said Triolo. "I even decorated the rooms myself using antiques and period pieces."

After months of renovations they opened Pineapple Hill in 1994. In 1996, the couple built a five-room addition to the original house. The new rooms generated the income they needed to hire a housekeeping staff.

But the toughest challenge Triolo faced wasn't opening Pineapple Hill's doors—it was shifting from being an entrepreneur to being a manager. "I used to worry about the day-to-day operations. But with an excellent staff in place, I can now focus on other aspects, including marketing,

advertising and public relations."

Triolo acknowledges that being in charge can be difficult too. "There were a lot of sleepless nights in the beginning," said Triolo. "You're almost afraid to stop at the end of the day because you're the sole source of income." She added, "There's nobody to pass the responsibilities up the ladder to."

Most of all, Triolo likes the affect Pineapple Hill has on her visitors. "We have guests who come in on a Friday night from Manhattan and Philadelphia who are exhausted after a week of work," said Triolo. "But by Sunday afternoon they're refreshed and rejuvenated. It's a great feeling when you can trade e-mail addresses and hug your guests goodbye after just two days."

Although their families have been supportive of the couple's venture, it has been hard on them as well because of the demands of Pineapple Hill. "Unfortunately, we miss a lot of graduations, picnics and birthday parties," acknowledged

Rowan Magazine

Volume 5, Number 2

Spring '00

Pages 14-19

Copyright ©2000

www.rowanmagazine.com



Triolo. “But they do help out when they can. My mother (former Rowan professor, Lynn Klem) thinks nothing of coming down to help clean rooms during the holidays. My father, sister and stepson have helped paint and my cousin made our wrought iron Pineapple Hill sign.”

Triolo, a computer science major while at Rowan, credits her education with helping her to succeed. “When I think about the important relationships I made in college, many of them were with the faculty,” recalled Triolo. “It was comforting to know how accessible they were, and I try to be that way with my own guests. If I’m not home they have my cell phone number. Our guests can always reach me—even if we’re on vacation.”

While Triolo and her husband rarely have down time and are always on call to fix a guest’s problem, they wouldn’t have it any other way. “I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t own Pineapple Hill,” said Triolo.

“Owning Pineapple Hill has been a dream come true.”

Curator of Fun: Garden State Discovery Museum

From an old-fashioned Jersey diner that teaches proper nutrition to a Pinelands trail that explains the importance of conserving the environment, exhibits at the Garden State Discovery Museum entertain while they educate.

All of the museum’s hands-on, interactive exhibits feature kid-friendly, educational themes—with a New Jersey twist. “We wanted the museum to be a celebration of what’s great about the Garden State,” said Sarah Orleans ’86, director. “It’s a place where parents and children can use their imaginations and explore and learn together—except the child is the teacher and the parent is the student. For example, our Bernoulli blower (a ball suspended in air) teaches the principles of flight, but more importantly, it gives the kids a chance to explain why they think the ball is floating in air.”

Their own weekend family treks into



Philadelphia to enjoy its cultural offerings inspired Orleans and her business partner, Roree Iris-Williams, to open a children’s museum in South Jersey. “Our goal was to reach parents who didn’t want to have to travel into the city for a cultural experience,” said Orleans.

Orleans credits her education for teaching her the important role entertainment plays in educating children. “In many ways Dr. Gene Vivian [see page 11] was the inspiration that led the museum to be what it is today,” said Orleans. “He was the professor who taught me that kids learn through experienced learning—an idea we call the ‘ah-ha’ moment.”

Before opening the museum, Orleans was the director of programs for the Franklin Institute and had years of non-profit experience. If the new enterprise was to be successful, however, the museum had to turn a profit. “I knew this was a really good idea and that it was worth putting everything on the line financially,” said Orleans.

By the end of its first year, 125,000 people had visited the museum. Its success enabled Orleans to establish a Museum-on-the-Move program to reach under-served and disabled children. Today, the museum reaches approximately 150,000 people annually.

While the museum is a for-profit business, Orleans has used a non-profit strategy to help underwrite the cost of producing the museum’s exhibits and programming. “We’ve begun soliciting local com-

panies who are interested in investing their marketing dollars to support the museum’s programs while reaching their target audiences,” said Orleans. “It’s been a fine line, but finding the right sponsor for the right project enables us to produce higher-quality exhibits.”

Orleans acknowledges that owning a business can be harder for women entrepreneurs because of family pressures. However, her husband David Orleans ’86 completely supported her decision to start her own business. “My partner and I have been really lucky with respect to our husbands’ support,” Orleans said. “They both help out as much as they can with the exhibits and performances. They really complete the picture.”

One of Orleans’ biggest business challenges came from a most unlikely source: Mother Nature. In 1998, a tornado tore a path through the Cherry Hill warehouse complex where the museum is located—ripping down a wall, severely damaging the roof and forcing Orleans to close the museum. “It was devastating,” said Orleans. “It destroyed many of the exhibits and made a mess of the entire museum.”

Yet the outpouring of community support for the museum was tremendous—and affirmed Orleans’ belief in the museum’s importance to the area.

“We knew we had to rebuild because the museum was just too valuable an asset to the community and to our family,” she recalled. “To know my business means so much to people means more to me than making money.”

Multimedia Moguls: RAC Productions

When Bob Christensen ’84 and Pete Sandford ’83 were kids, they built sand castle empires at the shore where their families vacationed together. Twenty years later, with their friendship as the foundation, they’re building a new empire out of something more lasting than sand.

Before they established their video and multimedia firm, RAC Productions, Christensen and Sandford produced promotions for a cable company and a local



TV station respectively. But their jobs lacked the creative challenge they desired. “We wanted the ability to choose our own clients and projects,” explained Christensen, “and work directly with our customers to produce the kind of creative work we knew we were capable of.”

With similar employment and education backgrounds, it was relatively easy for the partners to form a company capitalizing on their strengths. At first they focused on video production, but agreed not to lock themselves into one specialty. “We wanted the ability to develop and adapt from new communication technologies and tools as they emerged,” Sandford said. “We knew this would give RAC the competitive advantage.”

Located in Princeton, RAC’s offices feature a computer graphics and video-editing studio where they produce everything from training videos to interactive kiosks, CD-ROM brochures and web sites. “Our typical client needs to communicate information—whether it’s educational, promotional or commercial—in a dynamic way,” Sandford said. “They want something more than just a brochure or a television spot.”

Selecting the right technology for each client has positioned RAC as an electronic communication powerhouse. “The University of Southern California School of Medicine needed a better way to deliver information from one of its newsletters,” recalled Christensen. “We designed a database-driven web site allowing 65,000 medical professionals to receive up-to-date medical information, obtain continuing education credits,

take tests and communicate online.”

One of the team’s biggest challenges was identifying the roles that each would have in the firm. “We realized that our strengths weren’t necessarily similar,” said Sandford. “Rather than duplicate each other’s roles, we focused on our individual strengths. What was once a source of conflict is now one of the company’s greatest assets.”

Today, Christensen directs the team’s creative side and oversees new media development. Sandford is responsible for business development, supervising video production and managing the firm’s daily operations. “We’ve shifted our roles from being the producers and programmers to being supervisors and business developers,” said Christensen. “We are now able to concentrate on running the business.”

Both partners credit their education with giving them the competence to succeed in their field. “The skills we needed to move the company from strictly video production to video, multimedia and Internet development came directly from our education,” Christensen said. “Those same skills have helped us succeed in our management roles.”

Sandford and Christensen believe their business venture wouldn’t be successful without the support of their families, especially their wives Moira Sandford and Judy Christensen. “We both have kids and houses,” said Sandford. “We’ve had to sacrifice a lot of free time and they’ve been very understanding.”

The advent of new Internet and communication technologies has compelled the partners to develop an aggressive growth strategy for the company. “We want RAC to continue being a major player, so we expect to grow from 12 employees to more than 40 by the end of 2002,” said Sandford. “If you are in the position of playing catch up in this industry you will never succeed. Our goal is to be ahead of everyone else.”

The Science of Marketing: Scientific Marketing Services

When Robert Norton was a young man, he made a promise to him-

self: if he wasn’t in his own business by the time he was 45 he would quit whatever he was doing and start one. Eight days before he turned 46 he made good on his promise—he resigned a successful vice president position and started Scientific Marketing Services (SMS). “It was time to bet on myself,” said Norton.

Norton graduated from Rowan with an English degree and became a teacher. But shortly after, he left teaching to pursue a career in his first passion—advertising. For 18 years at Contis Glass he honed his marketing and advertising skills and began to think about the type of company he could start. He wanted a business that would enable him to combine all of his interests—art, science and advertising.

Norton imagined a business that would specialize as a marketing resource by integrating advertising and marketing functions for scientific and high tech companies. “When I started SMS there were no firms that could handle all the marketing requirements of high tech and industrial companies,” said Norton. “I knew if I didn’t do it, somebody else would.”

With no clients or prospects, Norton opened SMS’s first office in a room of his family’s home in Landisville in 1979. Since then, the company has grown to take over the Nortons’ basement and a three-floor addition to his home. A house behind them accommodates video production and Internet development.

SMS’s understanding of marketing problems of its clients gives it an edge over traditional advertising and marketing firms. “Our learning curve is very short,” said Norton. “We understand technology, so we can quickly implement the kind of



marketing plans our clients need—everything from hiring the right people to image and publicity campaigns.”

SMS appeals to companies who need a full-range of marketing services but can't afford to hire four or five specialized firms to launch a successful marketing campaign. “It's been very rewarding to see one- and two-man companies grow into large corporations because we helped a product find its place in the market,” he said.

Norton wants his clients to think of SMS as an extension of their own companies. “We wanted to ‘partner’ with our clients rather than just be considered a vendor,” said Norton. “It's this relationship SMS develops with its customers that makes the company different.”

Norton believes one of the reasons SMS is so successful is because he encourages his employees to continually develop their professional skills to be prepared for changes in the marketplace. “I'm very fortunate to be able to attract and keep excellent people,” said Norton. “Their primary concern is to stay ahead of our clients. They really care about their work and that comes across to our clients.”

Perhaps the greatest strength of SMS is Norton's business philosophy—he seals each deal with an old-fashioned handshake. “We don't require our clients to sign a contract,” said Norton. “With SMS, they can come and go as they please. Fortunately, they mostly come and don't go.”

Norton's wife, Helen Pedersen Norton '60, retired last June after 30 years of teaching and now works for SMS handling public relations, accounting and administrative responsibilities. Two of the Nortons' three children also work for the company. Their son Scott works with web site development, video editing and music production and their daughter Laura is a graphic designer and writer.

“SMS started with a dream,” said Norton, “and that dream has been validated. We're in our 21st year and we've grown to 20 employees with clients around the world. The concept worked.”

Flour Power: Don's Bagels

Donald Brasco '89 started his bagel business from scratch in 1991—and his customers think it's delicious.

Before Brasco was up to his elbows in dough, he was a supervisor and internal auditor with United Parcel Service. “I loved working for UPS and thought I would be with them forever,” he recalled, “and when the company expanded, they gave me the opportunity to work overseas.”

The job was tempting, but Brasco's entrepreneurial spirit proved stronger. “I've always wanted to own my own business,” said Brasco. “I had recently graduated and gotten married, so it seemed like a good time.”

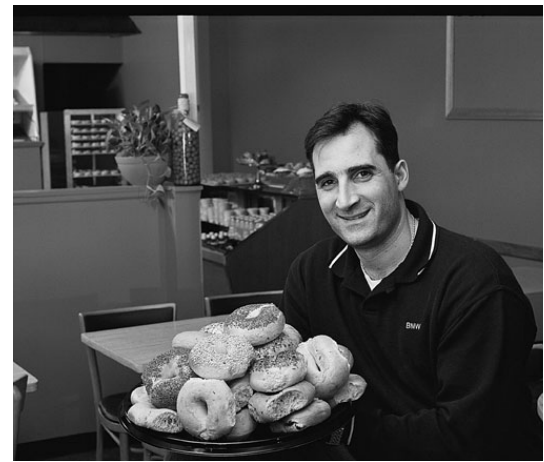
Brasco's inspiration for a bagel shop came from weekend trips with his wife Donna to North Jersey to visit with family and friends. Bagels were big in North Jersey, but South Jersey still hadn't experienced the bagel boom. He seized the opportunity.

Brasco spent months honing his cooking skills, perfecting his recipes, visiting bagel shops across New Jersey and learning the ins and outs of the bagel-baking business with the help of an old Polish couple who had immigrated to the United States. By July 1990, he had found the perfect location for his shop in Double Tree Shopping Center in Glassboro. With a shoestring budget and the help of his wife, family and friends, Don's Bagels opened for business six months later.

“The first year we opened we were mobbed with customers,” said Brasco. “We had a year and a half of phenomenal sales and our lunch crowd was standing room only for nine months straight. Not only were we new, there just weren't any other bagel shops around.”

By the mid-nineties, super markets, fancy bagel franchises and convenience marts—some just yards from his shop—were threatening to bust Brasco's business. A brutal bagel brouhaha erupted as the competition flooded the market with bagels and predicted the demise of Brasco's shop in the local newspapers.

But after the flour had settled, most



of his competition had closed their doors. The victorious Brasco credits his work ethic with seeing the shop through. “I survived because I worked every day,” he said. “I do everything and anything. It's my name on the door, so it's my reputation.”

Like a true craftsman, Brasco is a perfectionist who enjoys the creative aspects of his trade. He especially enjoys surprising his patrons with specialty and holiday flavors like cranberry, egg nog and pumpkin. “My customers appreciate the variety of unusual flavors I offer,” said Brasco. “But I think it's the fact that I bake all of my bagels fresh from scratch everyday that keeps them coming back.”

Brasco is also a big believer in giving back to the community that has supported him over the years. “I have a lot of University customers, so I like to cater Rowan occasions and donate bagels for athletic events,” he said. “We also donate bagels to churches, local charities and non-profit organizations.”

Brasco considers himself more of a businessman than an entrepreneur. “I'm constantly educating myself about new business techniques and learning from other successful business owners,” he explained. “Because I make my own products, I also have to think of myself as a researcher, manufacturer, marketer, salesman and distributor.”

Brasco's keen entrepreneurial skills keep the bagel shop thriving. “When it comes to business,” Brasco concluded, “the people who truly succeed are the ones that do it for themselves.” ■