

Windows Open Up in an Entrepreneur's Life

At the pre-Christmas Delbrook Craft Fair last year, one booth was an island of sunny pastels blooming in a sea of red and green.

Kimberly Mara, the petite young woman showing off her wares, was no hobbyist but the 1999 winner of the "Entrepreneur of the Year - Be Your Own Boss" award given by the BC Self Employment Program.

Mara supports herself and her daughter and employs several local women with her Maddi-Bear line of children's clothing (named after her daughter), which can be found at many of the North Shore craft fairs. The clothing is decorated with a wild variety of tie-dyed patterns in color combinations that shout, "Being a kid is fun!"

In contrast, Mara, at 29, is understated, usually dressed in dark colors, her shiny red-brown hair framing her animated face. On the table, among the cotton garments on display, an album of black-and-white photos speaks to her other life as a photographer.

Mara, as she puts it, "paused" her career when her daughter Maddison came into her life. "I was seven months pregnant, up a ladder with

two cameras and a tripod, when I decided, "I can't do this any more," she recalls. So she began to search for ways of earning money from home.

"Maddi-Bear started as a joke. I tie-dyed some diaper-shirts for a baby shower, and everyone at the party wanted them." Orders from friends poured in, and Mara began to experiment with techniques and colours. Although tie-dying is a technique associated with the hippie era, Mara selected her own, unusual, palette of purples, blues, pinks, and yellows.

When mail orders for Maddi-Bear's colourful baby clothes increased, Mara began to buy wholesale the white clothes she needed. The deliveries proved too unreliable for the pace of her business, so she put ads in the paper looking for seamstresses. Mara decided to hire North Shore women, many of them single mothers, who, like herself, wanted to earn money at home.

Mara bought fabric in Coquitlam and used skills she learned in a high-school design and tailoring course to create the patterns for her clothing line. Erica Bluhm, a professional designer and seamstress works along

with Mara to create the finished garments. Then Mara sits down of an evening to watch videos while "tying" the items in various ways with elastic.

Downstairs in her home, Mara chooses from a large selection of dyes bought at Granville Island and California to create the colour combinations and patterns she has found to be most popular with her customers. (Garments can also be custom-dyed.) The tied garments sit for 24 hours before being rinsed several times, then hung to dry on bright racks from the ceiling. The sound of the radio and running water can be heard in the background.

With a cottage industry such as this, it is extremely difficult to do more than pay for the cost of materials. Mara has managed to decrease these costs and maintain a high-quality product. Her full-colour catalogue shows off a selection of dresses, hats, leggings, bibs, receiving blankets, rompers, T-shirts, pajamas, and swimsuits.

Mara also works hard at marketing her wares. Maddi-Bear clothing can be found at numerous stores in the Lower Mainland, Francis Hills in Gastown, The Kids' Place in Squamish, and Bobbits in Vancouver. She also sells to stores on Vancouver Island and in Alberta. Mara says she would like to get away from selling at craft fairs altogether and so is working to create the quantity of consistent-quality items necessary to gain entry into a "big-box" store.

In addition to her self-taught marketing strategies, Mara learned a great deal when she entered a provincial self-employment program in 1997. The program is funded through unemployment insurance and supplies each participant with a monthly living allowance. Some of the subjects in the program, especially those dealing with cash flow, were difficult for Mara to grasp; "But once I got it, it was like potty training. I got it!"

Kids just want to have fun! Kimberly Mara and wee friends model some of her cheerful creations.

