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MOMMIES ONLY CLUB, LLC

Mentor -> Student -> Mentor

“You know you have success as a mentor when your protege or student is successful and becomes, herself or himself, a mentor for others”.

-c.a. dickson, 2002.

“Maria Chan Plourde, Owner and Designer,” is how her business cards read. She tells a class of design and merchandising students, “ My company was established in 1997 to capitalize on the increasing demand for affordable maternity and nursing clothing, by offering consumers an assortment of uniquely designed, high quality and moderately priced maternity and nursing accessories made in Hawaii from Hawaii prints.” Maria is back at the University of Hawaii, not as a student this time, but as a mentor and teacher. Maria immigrated to the US with her family in 1964. She and her family settled in Hawaii immediately. Maria’s parents and other members of the family immediately started various types of businesses. She graduated from the University of Hawaii’s Apparel Design and Merchandising Program in 1986, after spending a year in New York at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She tells students, “I always knew I wanted to own my own business.”

From student to business owner. As she begins to tell students about her business, it is clear that the road has been long and has had numerous twists and turns. The issues she emphasizes throughout her presentation are: every single job, no matter how far from owning her own business it seemed at the time, taught her invaluable lessons that prepared her for the business she has now owned for six years; the role and value of mentors, from teachers to employers to co-workers, has meant additional learning and support; she never gave up her determination and dream of owning her own business, ever.

The Maria I see today is substantially, appreciably, positively and irrefutably different from the young woman who graduated in 1986. As a student, Maria was shy and exceptionally quiet, working hard to be an “A” student. She is now openly passionate, assertive and self-assured in a electropositive way. She has achieved her

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goal of owning her own business and is on her way to building her business far beyond the moderate success she has at the present.

As Maria addressed my Entrepreneurship class, she stands up and confidently walks to the chalkboard to illustrate her points and moves about the room as if she owns it... which she does for the moment. Students lean forward to catch what she says and to take notes. After delivering a brief educational background of himself, she begins to tell students about how each job she has had has added to her knowledge base for her own business. She admits that as she began each job to earn enough money to support herself and to save enough money to start her business, she did not know how that particular job would help her.

While a student at the University of Hawaii and in New York, Maria supplemented her income from other jobs with custom designing and sewing for a fee. Many of the jobs that she took to support herself, she admits, looked like dead-end jobs to her as far as her business was concerned. She worked long into the night every night designing and sewing for individual customers, in addition to her daytime job. As a self-employed night worker, she designed and sewed prom dresses, bridal gowns, evening gowns, and plus-size garments.

All job paths lead to the same dream. Maria told the class that she did have several jobs in the garment industry. She worked as a designer and seamstress for two different bathing suit companies where she learned about workroom and factory production. She learned what it takes to keep a factory and its employees operating. As she watched thousands of yards of fabric moving into the factory and swimsuits and accessories moving out, she noted the importance of “just-in-time” delivery and the importance of on-time delivery of orders for retail customers. She noted that delivery of fabrics and notions must be continuous enough to keep workers busy. She noted that down-time for machinery of all sorts meant substantial loss of revenues relative to idle workers, compounded by subsequent overtime pay and late deliveries of finished goods. Maria was learning and continuing to operate her own very small custom design and finishing business on the side.

Maria worked as a fabric buyer and personal secretary for a garment manufacturer, learning what it takes to manage a large garment manufacturing operation. Maria learned first hand about bank loans and servicing debt; she learned about the importance of factory operations and how that impacted the bottom line of a manufacturing operation. She learned about balancing the cost of goods and other expenses in the factory against sales. She learned about assessing potential customer financial stability and about debt collection. Maria stated, “As I worked every night and on weekends trying to grow my own little business, I thought constantly about all the things I had learned and was learning and how I could use them for my own business.”

As Maria’s business grew, she agreed to design and make uniforms for a large community organization, learning through hard experience about the uniform business ... from working with a large group, all with differing ideas, to designing the fabric,

ordering the fabric, taking delivery and finishing for delivery. “It’s all about timing. Everything has to be carefully timed to come in and go out as needed. I never realized how important timing was to the financial side of a business,” Maria said. She needed to employ friends and family to help her meet her deadlines. But her business was growing, and she was determined to grow it enough to make it a full time business for her.

From a job Maria held as a shipping and sales administrative assistant for an airfreight company, she learned about the costs of transporting goods and insurance. She learned how to handle US Customs regulations and the appropriate use of ground transportation as well as airfreight. “When I took that job with the air freight company, I just needed a job. I never dreamed how much I would learn and that I would use there in my business every day now,” she said, looking back.

As an architectural draft person for an architectural firm, Maria learned about the precision of space planning and how to make space work for her. She learned how to apply architectural precision to her garment designing.

Working for the Hawaii State Legislature as a word processor, she discovered that simple word processing could help her better understand how laws could work for or against a business owner. For instance, Maria found that the state legislature passed bills to support the right of women to nurse their babies in public places. Word processing was strictly a 9 to 5 type of job, leaving Maria free to increase the output of her own business. With ambition and the dreams of an entrepreneur, she continued to grow her business.

The Breakthrough

By 1998, Maria had been learning and yearning (for her own business) for almost 20 years. It had been over 10 years since her graduation from the University of Hawaii. Maria’s two sisters were pregnant, looking for maternity clothes and finding little to satisfy their needs. They asked Maria to make some maternity clothes for them which she began to do. Then her sisters’ friends began to ask for similar maternity clothing, and they were willing to pay well for what they needed. Maria looked critically at the maternity market. There were no companies in Hawaii producing maternity wear. Retailers that sold maternity wear complained that they had difficulty buying suitable maternity wear for Hawaii’s women, especially in the winter. There was certainly no maternity wear that used fabrics with Hawaii themes, despite the fact that Hawaii fabric designs were popular on the US mainland for men and non-pregnant women.

Customers, sisters, friends and a growing number of others defined their clothing needs for Maria: suitable for Hawaii’s climate, garments that would “grow” as their bodies changed during pregnancy, pretty without being cutesy, fabrics with Hawaii themes where possible, acceptable for office wear and for going to dinner, casual wear for casual activities, washable and easy care.

Nature assisted Maria's business endeavors as well. Maria's pregnant customers became mothers and most became nursing mothers. Their needs for clothing changed, and now they needed other accessories as well.

Maria worked with family and friends for several months to come up with just the right name and logo for her business in 1997. She continues to use the "Mommies Only Club" (MOC) name and logo in the garments and accessories she manufactures and on various other business-related items. She registered her business. The University of Hawaii did not offer an entrepreneur course when Maria was a student but she found her way to the Women's Business Center (WBC) in Honolulu, which is supported by the US Small Business Administration (SBA). The Women's Business Center helped Maria write her first business plan in 2000. Maria says, "It is a living guide/map to direct me to make best the use of resources that are or may be available to me. The writing and implementation of the business plan assisted me in seeing what was feasible and realistic versus what is not feasible and realistic. I am constantly referring to my business plan to help me focus and refocus."

Maria's dream was coming true. She began selling to retailers who loved her products.

In 1997, Maria participated in the first annual Baby Expo trade show in Honolulu, which itself has grown substantially, demonstrating the need for service in this area of the economy. At the first Expo, the Mommies Only Club projected sales of \$1,500 as a part time operation. By the third annual Baby Expo, sales had increased to almost \$10,000. It was clearly time to hire someone to help with the sewing and Maria began to outsource locally.

Outsourcing. Maria had already learned a bit about outsourcing when she worked for various apparel companies in Hawaii. She now learned even more about the advantages and disadvantages of using outside contractors. In contracting to large companies, the advantages and disadvantages were quite different from those of contracting to small home-based businesses. Her personal knowledge of how goods move, from concept to consumer, especially sewn products, which are, almost by definition, hand sewn, helped her keep her sales in line with her production capability.

While she recognized that some day she might need to outsource in foreign countries, she wanted to keep sourcing materials and labor from Hawaii as long as possible to give back to the community that gave to her. An immigrant herself, Maria wanted to give as much to the Hawaii immigrant community as possible.

MOC applies for a loan. In 2000, Maria applied for and received a Red Manini Micro Loan Program. Her loan proposal won high marks for its market research depth and analysis. The biggest factor holding back the growth of MOC was the land capital for fabrics, notions, craft fair entry fees, advertising and other smaller expenses. Maria knew for certain that if she got a small infusion of capital, she could handle her own salary and meet her payroll for contractors. "I just needed that little

extra push. My retail customers were in place, but without some capital I couldn't stretch far enough. My receivables were always just short of my capital needs." In return for the loan, Maria pledged her sewing machines, the value of two very small mutual funds, and her garment inventory. The Red Manini (manini means "stingy" in Hawaiian) micro loan period was one year.

Within the year, Maria repaid the loan. In the process, she had established her reliability and stability, and that of her company, which would help her get additional loans. Sales were such that she was able to develop new products that were exceptionally successful. She subsequently has obtained several bank loans to further expand her business. She now sells her products to retailers on the US mainland and is looking forward to additional expansions. Her market research, analysis and subsequent strategic planning have positioned MOC for substantial growth over the next few years.

Maria is aware that she is less of a risk-taker than other business owners might be. While encouraging and mentoring others who have the entrepreneurial spirit, she is actively seeking professional coaching that encourages her take more planned risks, fully understanding both the upside and downside risks. She has read the extant literature and realizes that risk aversion in business is more common with women than with men. She is learning. She told the class:

I know that my company is small and that, therefore, what I have at risk is less. I just don't want to disappoint anyone. I know though, that if everything fell apart, I would start over. But I know MOC will succeed. It has to. There are so many pregnant and nursing mothers who want and need my products. No one else is making what we make. We have customers who are entering their third pregnancy with products we made for their first pregnancy... and they are buying more... updated fabrics and styles." "And, of course, we've learned a lot, my team and I. We talk to our retailers, customers at trade shows, retail customers, and we are constantly learning more about what they want...what works for them, and what does not.

Maria showed pieces from her lines to the class. She also had pictures of a few of her customers wearing the nursing garments her company has manufactured. The pieces were impressive. For example: for nursing, one dress with a jacket had very cleverly hidden zippers on each side of the chest area to give infants access to the breast, and the matching jacket had a very large soft collar that was to be used to cover the breast and the baby while nursing; T-shirts allowed for discreet nursing in public; a diaper bag converts to a changing blanket and also to a small quilt. Maria showed the class pictures of gift baskets with various items for expectant mothers. The students were quite impressed by the ingenuity of the designs.

Maria travels often now, selling to retailers on the US mainland. She uses her time on airplanes to design and plan for the future of MOC. She says, "This is my business. I am doing what I always wanted to do...designing and owning my own business. Everything I've learned has led to this [business]. It will not fail. It will grow. There are no limits. I can do it. This is my destiny."