

downtown express

VOLUME 20, NUMBER 32

THE NEWSPAPER OF LOWER MANHATTAN

DECEMBER 21 - 27, 2007



Downtown Express photo by Elizabeth Robert

Rachel Thebault, a former investment banker, now runs Tribeca Treats while taking care of her daughter Marin, 2. Thebault is one of a growing number of Downtown mothers with young children who have returned to the workforce by starting their own business.

‘Having it all’ includes a business for some Downtown moms

BY JULIE SHAPIRO

Since Rachel Thebault left her high-pressure investment-banking job, her life hasn't exactly slowed down. In the past three years, she graduated culinary school, opened her own bakery and gave birth to her first child.

"Even though there's as much stress in this job, if not more, overall I'm a more relaxed person," said a smiling Thebault, standing in her bakery beside display cases of ginger truffles, chocolate cupcakes and caramel-frosted sandwich cookies.

Thebault, 32, owns Tribeca Treats, a bakery and specialty shop on Reade St. She works 60 to 90 hours a week, weighing the demands of her year-old business and her 2-year-old daughter Marin.

Like many Lower Manhattan working parents, Thebault and her husband, a con-

vertible bond trader for Deutsche Bank, cobble together a schedule of preschool, babysitting and parental care for Marin. But the balancing act doesn't always work. On a day when the babysitter calls in sick, Thebault scrambles to reschedule meetings and keep her daughter from throwing a tantrum at the bakery.

"I feel like I'm juggling all these balls and they're all starting to fall," Thebault recalled. "It's more than you can handle at times."

Thebault is part of a growing group of women entrepreneurs who are starting businesses at younger ages than any other generation, said Erin Fuller, executive director of the National Association of Women Business Owners.

"This is the next phase of the women's movement," Fuller said. "That's still the

American dream: to own a business."

Between 1997 and 2006, the number of women-owned businesses in the New York City metro area increased at nearly twice the rate of New York businesses in general, according to the Center for Women's Business Research. Women-owned businesses account for 33 percent of all businesses in the area.

This trend means that women with young children are increasingly likely to start businesses, Fuller said. Many of these moms use personal and family savings to start businesses out of their homes — a prevalent choice in Tribeca and Battery Park City's upper-middle-class neighborhoods. These women entrepreneurs often put a child-themed spin

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Moms get down to business Downtown

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on their products.

Thebaud's hectic life as a working mother convinced her to sell her own frozen cookie dough at the bakery, for easy entertaining for last-minute guests. Busy moms planning birthdays can save time by buying paper plates and napkins, colorful wrapping paper, soccer-ball-shaped candleholders, and child-sized aprons at Tribeca Treats — along with the cake.

Amid the heady scent of baking chocolate and beside several workers carving a massive layered cake in the bakery's open kitchen, Thebaud described her previous life in the very different investment-banking world. She had clients in retail and restaurants, which taught her about creating a budget and business plan. Thebaud's background comes in especially handy when negotiating contracts. Rather than seeing her as a young woman trying to run a business, "People take me more seriously," Thebaud said.

Another Tribeca mom, Nikki Francis, started a business that draws on her former career in fashion design. Francis makes all-natural spa products and markets them using her experience in product development at J. Crew, The Limited and United Colors of Benetton.

Francis, 41, started making spa products as Christmas gifts several years ago. Soon, her friends and relatives were asking to buy the soaps, lotions and sprays year-round, so Francis named her business "Khushi" — which means "happiness" in Hindi — and got to work perfecting her recipes. She



Downtown Express photo by Elizabeth Rubin

"At the end of the day, when the kids go to bed, you're exhausted," said Nikki Francis, who is raising two children under 6 with her husband. She owns Khushi, which makes balms and oils, and only sells to clients with "good energy."

makes the toners, balms and scrubs by hand with essential oils, local wild peppermint, lavender and grapefruit.

"Whatever goes on your body goes into your body," said an effervescent Francis, who stretched while talking. "This is your body's version of organic eating."

Francis runs her business through mail order from her Hudson St. apartment while her children — June, 5½, and Jackson, 2½ — are sleeping. During the day she keeps them involved by letting them help with simple tasks, such as counting out labels. Her children inspired many of her products, from a peaceful spray that calms them at bedtime to a healing balm that soothes burns and bruises.

Worried that his mother had forgotten to put the balm on his cheeks and diaper, Jackson once yelled, "Mom, I need the balm!" Francis recalled, laughing.

Francis, whose husband works for JP Morgan Chase and does her accounting, is happy with the balance she's found between parenting and working. But it hasn't been easy — especially during December, her busiest month, when she does half of her entire year's business. She started Christmas shopping in August to prepare for the crunch.

"At the end of the day, when the kids go to bed, you're exhausted," Francis said. "[Your job] needs to inspire you. It takes a lot of time and endurance."

Francis sells many products wholesale to boutiques and yoga studios across the country, but admits that she's picky about her customers — she'll only sell to places that have "good energy." When her youngest child is in school full time, Francis will continue expanding the business, but for now, she's content with turning down opportunities that would mean too much growth too fast.

"I'm a full-time stay-at-home mom,"

Francis said. "That's my first priority."

While some women who seek flexibility start businesses rather than returning to their pre-child job, Thebaud, of Tribeca Treats, warns that businesses can take on a life of their own.

"Don't only start a business because it gives you the flexibility and free time to spend with your child," she said. "It's like having a second child. You have to split your time and attention."

Thebaud finds it difficult to track the number of hours she works each week, since she's always thinking about the bakery, imagining new recipes and products, even while on the subway. When balancing career and family, there is no magic formula that allows women to "have it all," she said.

"It's really tiring, but overall it works," Thebaud added. "In the end, it's worth it."

Several factors, from technology to education, contribute to the increase in young mother entrepreneurs, said Fuller of the women business owners group — but none of them do it because it's easy.

Having a child might trigger a woman to start a business because it is a major life change. "Huge life events make you reevaluate, take stock of what's important, what you really want to do," Fuller said. She added that the same is true of other big events, such as marriage or the death of a parent.

Margaret Picone, of Battery Park City, has had more career ambitions than she can count on one hand. The 32-year-old mother of 6-year-old twins has started two businesses — antique importing and a children's shop — since emigrating from Guatemala when she was 18. She went to interior design school and has worked for Central American consulates in New York, and maintains a busy lifestyle that gives new meaning to multitasking.

After her twins were born, Picone found-

ed Bella Zander Co., the online equivalent of an exclusive baby boutique. Bella Zander is also a concierge service, ideal for last-minute shower gifts or unique children's birthday presents. The company takes its name from Lauren Isabella and Alexander, Picone's children.

Once she had children, "I became obsessed with baby and children's products," said Picone, who wears stylish clothing and has a sheet of long, dark hair. Some moms relax by getting a manicure or seeing a movie, but Picone would pore over catalogues and Web sites, searching for cutting-edge clothing, furniture and toys for children.

A year and a half ago, Picone got a full-time job running events for a major bank, but she didn't want to give up Bella Zander. She stopped advertising and cut international shipping, keeping the business small and catering mainly to repeat customers.

Picone's advice for working moms is "not to overthink the path," she said. "It makes you a better woman to find something you really love to do — and it makes you a better mom, too."

For now, Picone, whose husband is an accountant, is happy with her job and the balance she's found, but she has her eye on the future as well. She could see herself starting another business, maybe in planning family events.

"I'd love to do something on my own again," Picone said. She paused. "Maybe when they go off to college."

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