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CHOW DOWN ON GROOVY GRANOLA

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Hippie Chow replaces "lab created snacks" with natural and locally sourced ingredients.
By Kate Leibsle

Entrepreneur
Valerie Jennings

Type of Business
All-natural granola snack foods

Business Information
Hippie Chow Natural Foods
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Quote
"It's about balancing. I've become very efficient with everything."
Valerie Jennings

Love and concern for another's health can prompt people to do a lot of things. In Valerie Jennings' case, those feelings led to the building of a successful business.

Watching her boyfriend pack his lunch for work one day, Jennings was, quite frankly, appalled at the list of ingredients listed on the bag of the snack he included.

"I didn't recognize any of them" she said. "I realized everything about it had been created in a lab. I told him, " This is fine for today, but I will make you something else for tomorrow."

Jennings, who was working for a commercial real estate finance company, had already been questioning her line of work when she made her first batch that night of what would become Hippie Chow.

Being involved in some of the largest commercial foreclosures in the country for the past couple of years was draining both physically and emotionally, for Jennings.

"I'd really started questioning my career path," she said. "Was this what I wanted to do, or was I interested in pursuing something smaller where I could have a more immediate impact with people.

"I thought, "Maybe this is my opportunity.

Her boyfriend loved the granola goodies she packed for him and started sharing them with friends and co-workers, who began ordering their own.

But it was this past summer that it became clear a business was being born from her kitchen.

Dean & DeLuca

Jennings bought a spot at the Overland Park Farmers' Market and business boomed.

"It was our first time to sell not to family and friends," she said. "It was exciting to see customers come back week after week."

Her biggest break to date came from a chance meeting with a local food writer she met at an Overland Park Chamber of Commerce meeting.

"We sat next to each other, talked, and she was excited about the product. She said, " I can't wait to introduce you to some people. "

"Some people" included the general manager of the local Dean & DeLuca, who called Jennings the following

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morning. By the time Jennings finished her meeting with him, Hippiie Chow was slated for sale not just locally, but nationally.

Needless to say, Jennings was a bit taken aback by the offer and had to think about it for a bit to determine just how she'd be able to produce what the gourmet grocers' customers' both in stores and online' would need.

"We were working out of a rented kitchen at the Douglas County Fairgrounds (in Lawrence), because we could rent it by the day," she said.

The company still works out of that kitchen, fulfilling the needs of customers who can find the treats at Dean & DeLuca and Foo's Frozen Custard, another early wholesale customer.

Natural Way

At about the time Jennings made the first Hippiie Chow for her boyfriend, she'd taken a keen interest in natural foods and learning about where our food originates. When she began combing recipes and putting together the granola snacks, she was determined to keep them all-natural. Today, ingredients are sourced from as close to home as possible. Oats come from a mill in Marienthal, Kan., honey from Spring Hill, Mo., and pecans from Nevada, Mo.

Currently there are three varieties of Hippiie Chow available: original, peanut butter and chocolate. Jennings is hoping to add seasonal options soon. She's also looking for a permanent, larger production facility and has plans to add some employees.

She's still working her "regular" job and tending to Hippiie Chow in the evenings and on weekends, along with an ever-increasing band of family and friends willing to volunteer their time.

Jennings also has been working on the business side of things. Already working on an MBA at Rockhurst University, earlier this year she took a class at the Small Business Development Center at Johnson County Community College and enrolled in FastTrac at the Ewing M. Kauffman Foundation.

Not having a food background, she's turned to the Internet to do research and to local experts for mentoring and assistance.

"Basically, anyone who will give me five minutes, I try to learn as much as I can from them," she said.

The biggest change she's seen in her life since she started the business is that "time and sleep are at a premium," she said. "It's about balancing. I've become very efficient with everything."

Kate Leibsle is a writer for KC Small Business magazine. kleibsle@ithinkbigger.com

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