

MAMA OF THE MONTH

This month we met with Nicole Shulman, Co-founder and Director of Belly Art and Bayside Mum to Felix 14, Harry 13 & Lily 10.

How did Belly Art began and who's involved?

The concept for Belly Art came about in 2000 when I was pregnant with my first child. After reading an article on the popularity of celebrity belly casting in Hollywood, I loved the idea of capturing this special time in my life and I thought it would be fun. I asked my friend Ilana Pincus, who is co-founder and my business partner, to help cast my pregnant belly and help me paint a design that would serve as a memento of this time in my life. We had a blast doing it. When I became pregnant with my second son, we decided to do another cast and we were amazed at the differences in the shape and size of my two pregnant bellies.

Our pregnant friends asked for their belly's to be cast and designed, and then friends of friends began to ask for their belly's to be cast, the demand just grew and grew and before we knew it, Belly Art the business was born!

What were you doing before the idea Belly Art was conceived?

I worked for global IT companies as an Office Administrator for ten years and Ilana was a Primary and Secondary School Art Teacher prior to taking maternity leave to have our kids.

What were the first steps you took to turn what essentially began as a hobby into a thriving business?

We set out by going to obstetricians across Victoria and putting brochures advertising our Belly Casting service. We were amazed at how quickly the word spread and we were inundated with calls all from all over Victoria and interstate. It was at this stage we created our first DIY Belly Casting Kit due to the demand from customers who couldn't make it to the 'studio'. We converted a room in my house in Brighton and christened it as our 'Belly Art Studio'. Within our first year we had set up a website and local media was contacting us

to tell our story – it was a dream come true, but also really hard juggling 3 babies under 2 between us in that first year.

How did the business grow so quickly, how did you manage to develop what is today an extensive range of baby keepsakes?

We thought about what we wanted to see in the market place and what wasn't available. We wanted to create a range of keepsakes that used bright, funky, contemporary colours, as well as the traditional styles. We set about making the age old business of keepsakes modern, catering to parents of today. We knew the key was to create a range that was like no other, that was 100% safe and easy to use in our clearly recognisable striped packaging that parents would associate with quality. We researched our materials, we exhaustively tried and tested the products, we listened to feedback and we made our luck happen. Parents loved the products and between word of mouth and products that flew off the shelves it allowed us to keep developing ideas with great momentum. There are over 15 products and services in our range today!

What has been the greatest highlight to date?

We were finalists in the 2013 Telstra Small Business Awards, which was a great health check-up for our business. We also developed the Inkless Print System which is used in a wide range of our products as it is exactly that, an inkless wipe that is applied to baby's hand or foot that is completely invisible, safe and easy to use, that leave baby's foot clean and dry. When applied to the specially treated paper, a clear print of every single line and wrinkle of baby's foot or hand miraculously appears in seconds. The Belly Art Inkless Print Kit won the Children's division of the 2014 Gift & Life Instyle Award – this was the proudest moment to date for us.

They say never go into business with friends. Was it hard to make that work?

Ilana and I were great friends before we went into business, we've always been open and honest with each other and we are quite different people, so we balance each other out really well and therefore, have a really strong and equal partnership. We also have different strengths in the business - my background is in business management, while Ilana is the Creative Director. Ilana is an incredibly talented artist and has a Uni degree in Fine Arts. Ilana was also an Art teacher for over ten years so she is great with children and parents. The partnership works because we respect each other's expertise and we like each other. Out of hours, we try to have a 'work-talk free zone', but easier said than done!

What is your best advice to other Mum's thinking of starting a business?

Firstly, do your research. Find out where your ideas fit in the market place and who your target audience is. It's really important to also surround yourself with knowledgeable people that you trust to bounce your ideas off. While it's important to listen to their advice and understand that any constructive criticism isn't personal, it's also equally important to listen to your own instincts.

What has been an important lesson about running Belly Art?

Life is so busy for Ilana and I as working Mum's with 6 kids between us and constantly developing new product lines, looking after clients in the studio and our stockists, oh... and also being wives, but sometimes it's not just about looking forwards in business but also taking the time to look back and reflect every so often on how far you've come. It not only helps to reaffirm that you are on the right track but also helps to reinvigorate the passion you have for your business during those times when life can seem a little overwhelming.

Are there any new products in the pipeline?

The Imprint Kit is our latest arrival and has been a hit so far, but we are busily working on an exciting new product we will be launching in early 2015, but at this stage 'Mum's the Word'!!

Visit Belly Art at 700 Inkerman Road, North Caulfield or online at www.bellyart.com.au

Also available at over 450 stores nationally and overseas including Baby Bunting & Kidstuff Brighton.

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