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## THESE ENTREPRENEURS TURNED THEIR LOVE OF DOGS INTO CAREERS THEY ADORE

By J. Leslie Johnson

**Necessity, the Mother of Invention** Father and son duo Michael and Gary Friedland created ingeniously simple, brightly coloured rubber dog boots that protect dog paws from injury, whether from hot sidewalks or earthquake rubble.

**T**his past April, a massive, magnitude 7.8 earthquake rocked the coast of the South American country of Ecuador, collapsing buildings, destroying entire districts, and burying many in the towns of Manta, Portoviejo, and Pedernales. More than 600 died. Over 20,000 were injured.

Ecuador deployed over 10,000 soldiers to the disaster-strewn area, and the military brought in search and rescue dogs to seek for survivors amidst the rubble. The courageous dogs worked amidst the buckled buildings without hesitation, sometimes locating survivors, sometimes locating bodies. They paid a high price for their valor: jagged steel, shards of glass, and shattered

concrete tore into their legs and paws as they searched.

In the United States, Spanish-language station Amore Radio contacted Pawz, a Brooklyn-based company specializing in paw protection for dogs. Will the company help? Pawz immediately sent 120 packs of boots to the grief-stricken area in an effort to protect the heroic search and rescue dogs.

The boots, made of a durable natural rubber, provide a strong barrier between the dog's paws and potentially dangerous substances such as harmful chemicals, splintered building materials, and searing hot pavement. The deceptively simple protective boots are the brainchild of Gary Friedman, a retired art director in the New York area, who studied at the LaGuardia School of Music and Art, the inspiration for the hit movie *Fame*. Gary, who enjoys taking his Jack Russell Terrier, Huckleberry, for walks in the city, tried a number of boots to protect his dog's paws from hazards such as salt and chemicals but kept running into a problem: he couldn't keep the boots on Huckleberry's paws.



Father and son duo Michael & Gary Friedland have created & marketed ingeniously simple—and effective—dog boots.

“ Frustrated, Gary drew on his creative background and set to work designing dog boots that would stay on Huckleberry’s feet. After numerous inventive experiments, including the use of rubber dishwashing gloves and party balloons, Gary contacted a friend who ran a latex factory. ”

Somehow, they’d manage to slip off and frequently be lost. Losing one boot meant buying an entire new set of four, an expensive proposition.

Frustrated, Gary drew on his creative background and set to work designing dog boots that would stay on Huckleberry’s feet. After numerous inventive experiments, including the use of rubber dishwashing gloves and party balloons, Gary contacted a friend who ran a latex factory. His initial efforts progressed into a carefully engineered design, one that would hold up on the sidewalks of New York City. Gary started walking Huckleberry, sporting the colourful new rubber boots, drawing the attention of curious onlookers. Some just smiled as they saw a dog walking about in what appeared to be a pair of rubber galoshes. Others stopped him. They wanted to know where they could buy the boots. Gary, however, is not the entrepreneurial type. He is passionate about the boots but not about marketing. This is where his son, Michael, steps in. Like his father, Michael is artistic, having studied at Ithaca College in New York, a top school for film and media, and he works as a photographer and graphic designer. Unlike Gary, Michael has a strong entrepreneurial spirit. He also has a law degree and a head for business.

Michael just so happened to be looking around for a new business venture when he learned about the excitement his father’s new boots were creating. He understood the

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“ Deep inside, you know what you want to do, so don’t be afraid to go ahead with what makes you happy. ”



need for the boots, having first-hand knowledge of the peril to paws that lurks on busy urban streets and roads. Michael has a Husky/Lab cross, a beautiful white dog with striking blue eyes. “One time, I found him whining in what I thought was a puddle of water,” Michael recalls. “It turned out to be liquid chloride, a chemical used to melt ice on the roads.”

Gary and Michael decided to turn the boots into a business and in 2005, they started Pawz, with Gary as primary designer and Michael as primary marketer.

The innovative balloon-like boots have many selling points. For one, Pawz dog boots are safe for both the dog and the environment. They are made from natural rubber, a milky liquid called latex, which oozes from trees such as *Hevea brasiliensis*, commonly known as the rubber tree, when cut. In contrast, synthetic rubber is created artificially using chemicals such as acetylene and hydrochloric acid to make water-resistant substances like neoprene. Since Pawz are 100 percent natural, they are biodegradable and can be recycled. The bright colours of the boots—blue, purple, green, and hot pink—are derived from vegetable dyes.

The rubber boots, featuring a large balloon-like area that stretches over the dog’s paw, are much narrower at the top, where they fit quite snugly over the leg. This means the boots are quite easy to put on, and once on, they tend to stay on. In addition, the boots are inexpensive as compared to leather dog boots and sell in packs of 12. Although the boots are reusable, they eventually wear out over time. Once a boot has worn out, the dog owner can simply recycle it and slide a new one over the dog’s paw.

“It’s a “feel-good” business,” Michael explains, adding, “Our customers love the product and it solves a problem that they had. I see people smile when I walk down the street with a dog wearing brightly coloured boots—it makes everyone’s day, seeing a dog walking in blue boots.”

**Couture and Coconuts** Twin sisters Charisa Antigua and Carmina O’Connor followed their passion to start not just one but two successful businesses, creating both stylish pet fashions and health-improving treats.

“Deep inside, you know what you want to do, so don’t be afraid to go ahead with what makes you happy,” says Charisa Antigua. That is exactly what she and her twin sister, Carmina O’Connor, did when they co-founded Oscar Newman Luxury Pet Couture, a high-end pet fashion business for dogs.

The sisters, born in the Philippines, immigrated to the United States in the early 1990s where they completed post-graduate training in Computer Science. Although they had promising careers in the IT field working for information giants such as IBM, as creatives, they felt something was missing. After work they’d find themselves dabbling in pursuits like oil painting—until they experimented with an entirely new creative outlet: designing clothes for Charisa’s Yorkshire Terrier, Barbie. “We fell madly in love with doing this,” Charisa says.

And so, in 2003, the sisters co-founded their company, Oscar Newman, featuring an exclusive line of pet couture, including dresses, coats, and sweaters as well as blankets and toys, aimed at upscale pets and their owners. Their stylish garments feature hand-dyed fabrics and embellishments such as beading, crocheting, and smocking. Swarovski crystals adorn many of the garments and celebrities such as Hilary Duff, Paris Hilton, and Britney Spears have outfitted their dogs with Oscar Newman apparel. “We saw there was a growing demand for high-end pet fashion and we haven’t looked back since!” says Charisa.

Although Charisa and Carmina have a small staff at their headquarters in Batavia, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, it’s skillful artisans in the Philippines that create the garments under the watchful eye of their older sister, Jesusa, who conducts the ▶



**Pawz durable, natural rubber dog boots.**

**Auburn Leathercrafters' hand-crafted leather dog collars.**



**Oscar Newman high-style dog clothes.**



“ We saw there was a growing demand for high-end pet fashion and we haven't looked back since! ”

company's operations in the island country. Charisa and Carmina draw upon their artistic talents to design the stylish, distinctive garments in the United States and then the nimble-fingered crafters in Southeast Asia meticulously create them by hand.

The tags for their first collection featured the image of Charisa's beloved Yorkshire Terrier, Barbie, who was the inspiration for the company. Upon her passing, another little dog, Violet, came into Charisa's life. Although Violet was sweet and loving, she had some serious health issues.

"Violet had every allergy under the sun and a compromised immune system," explains Charisa, adding, "She would scratch herself until she bled." In a concerted effort to help the little dog, Charisa fed Violet a variety of fresh, wholesome diets and eliminated suspect foods such as grains but nothing helped. Then Charisa remembered how her own grandmother had cared for her in the Philippines. When she felt unwell, her nanna would give her fresh, wholesome coconut oil. Charisa started mixing organic coconut oil into Violet's food, a teaspoon of oil for every 10 pounds of body weight, and soon she started seeing results. "We were able to wean her off Prednisone [a steroid medication] for her allergies," explains Charisa, adding, "She improved beyond belief."

Encouraged by Violet's rapid improvement, the sisters looked into scientific research on the benefits of coconut oil for pets and discovered it can improve immune function as well as enhance digestion. Pets that regularly ingest premium coconut oil often have healthier skin and coats, and conditions such as chronic ear infections can improve. At the same time, their friends, noticing the remarkable improvement in Violet's health, started asking

for coconut oil for their own pets. Charisa and Carmina found it was difficult to find high-grade organic coconut oil for pets in the U.S. and so in 2009 they launched CocoTherapy, a company that offers a range of coconut-based products for pets, from organic virgin coconut oil to nutritious treats such as coconut chips.

"There are different ways to make coconut oil and CocoTherapy uses the very best methods," says Charisa, adding, "The oil is squeezed from the meat the day we harvest them." The sisters make the high-quality oil in the Philippines, one of the world's top producers of coconut oil, again under the careful management of their sister Jesusa. Wanting to give back to the country that has given them so much, Charisa and Carmina donate a percentage of profits from all CocoTherapy sales to the island nation's Philippine Animal Welfare Society (PAWS).

However, PAWS is not the only animal rescue group that the sisters assist. In addition to supporting numerous organizations in the United States such as the Animal Cancer Foundation, Yorkies Inc., and Best Friends Animal Society, Charisa and Carmina also created Violet's Friend in Need Fund, a program that provides pet owners with financial assistance for urgent veterinary care. "When Violet was sick, her vet bills were in the thousands," recalls Charisa. Although she was able to provide for Violet, many owners cannot, and so they are often left with considering euthanasia. Part of the profits from both Oscar Newman and CocoTherapy are invested into the fund and interested applicants can apply at [www.cocotherapy.com](http://www.cocotherapy.com).

"As a company overall, we are very conscientious about the products we make," explains Charisa. "We want pet lovers to know they can trust our products. It is a labor of love and we do it because we love our pets." ►



**Handcraftsmanship & Traditional Values** At family-run Auburn Leathercrafters, America's oldest manufacturer of leather dog collars, Alan and Anita Dungey are the third generation to proudly carry on the tradition of handcrafted dog products made with love and a commitment to community values.

Anita Dungey watches her new employee, a troubled youth, with a small measure of concern. It's his first day. He looks discouraged and Anita wonders if the semi-repetitive nature of the job is dampening his enthusiasm. On the second day, however, she sees a change in his outlook. Holding a sturdy, handcrafted dog collar in his hand, he enthuses, "This is really cool—I just made something!"

"This was incredibly encouraging for me," says Anita as she remembers the satisfaction her new employee, hired as part of a commitment to community outreach, derived from working with his own hands and creating a tangible product.

Anita and her husband, Alan, operate Auburn Leathercrafters, the oldest maker of leather dog collars in the United States. The company got its start in 1950, when Alan's grandfather, Everett Dungey, began fashioning handmade dog collars in his basement, impelled by his strong love of dogs and a fervent entrepreneurial spirit. The aspiring business owner started to show his carefully handcrafted products at local pet stores and soon discovered there was a growing demand for them. Everett expanded his business, moving from his basement to an actual shop. In time, his son, Gordon, Alan's father, joined him and together they developed the business into a full line of leather dog collars, leashes, and harnesses.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Alan makes his handcrafted collars and leashes in Auburn, a city in Cayuga County, New York. The city of 27,000 is located in the Finger Lakes Region of Upper New York state, a beautiful area of rolling hills and lush forests separated by 11 freshwater lakes that

“We are all rushing through our days,” says Anita, of the hectic, modern-day lives that many of us lead. “Our products are quiet and simple, a reminder of something we want to be in touch with.”

spread like fingers across the area. He maintains a small staff, which he treats, as did his grandfather and father, more like members of the family than employees.

“We foster values such as attention to detail and a determined work ethic, and this has created a wonderful team,” says Anita. “We support them and they are proud to say they work here.” Anita and Alan hire people from all walks of life—those with disabilities, ex-members of the military, and youths with troubled backgrounds—giving all an opportunity to contribute to the company and the community.

Anita and Alan's son, Christopher, will be following in his forebearers' footsteps—having just completed college, he is now returning to Auburn Leathercrafters. Alan will carry on the tradition of passing the family's knowledge to his son, just as his father passed it to him, and his grandfather before him.

“Christopher is excited about coming back and learning the business from top to bottom,” asserts Anita. And for her part, Anita is enthusiastic about her son assisting with new ventures such as expanding Auburn's line into Europe and Australia. The company must find a way to maintain the quality of its carefully crafted collars and leashes while absorbing other expenses such as the high cost of shipping. However, as Anita and Christopher maneuver the maze of constraints presented by a volatile, ever-changing world, they have an ally to guide them: their strong Christian faith.

“We stand behind all that we do, and if we make a mistake, we admit it and make it right,” explains Anita. “We can be proud of knowing we tried to do what was right, and we were not wasteful of our time and resources.”

Alan and Anita still produce the hallmark leather collars, leashes, and harnesses that Gordon and Everett created, but have enhanced the line with a few innovative designs of their own. “We added a cotton and leather line of tug toys that has done very well,” explains Anita. She believes their all-natural products appeal because they evoke a simpler time, a movement back to the earth, towards nature. “We are all rushing through our days,” says Anita, of the hectic, modern-day lives that many of us lead. “Our products are quiet and simple, a reminder of something we want to be in touch with.”

Auburn's fine products are available through pet retailers across the U.S. and Canada as well as online at [collarsandmore.com](http://collarsandmore.com) (auburndirect.com for wholesalers). ■