

# These Folks Mean Business

## Montgomery County Entrepreneurs Talk Shop



Ruth Hanessian of Animal Exchange

**Everyone's story is different: Why they decided to open a business, how they went about it, what hurdles they faced and how they achieved success.** But some commonalities emerged: the willingness to work long hours, the importance of research, the emphasis on quality, a conservative financial approach and an over-riding sense of curiosity and eagerness to learn new things. Many business owners admitted that they bore easily!

Here are their stories.

### **The Bird Is the Word** **Animal Exchange**

Ruth Hanessian opened Animal Exchange in 1979. At the time, women were just beginning to spread their wings as business owners in Montgomery County and

around the nation. Backed by an education at The Bronx High School of Science and Cornell University, where she majored in ornithology, internships at New York City's American Museum of Natural History and a research position at the Carnegie Institute of Washington (now the Carnegie Institute of Science), Hanessian nevertheless found the experience of opening a business in the late '70s a challenge. She had spent 20 years at home raising her three children, and society was not yet ready for women leaders.

"I had raised kids for 20 years, so I was somewhat out of a job," she says. "The kids were old enough that they could be on their own. I knew I needed to do something on my own. My degree is in ornithology, but you can't climb trees anymore at 40."

She went back to work part-time for a Gaithersburg pet store. After moving up to the position of store manager, she knew that she could do better. Animals and the people who love them weren't just a job to her, and with her education she was determined to open a new sort of pet store—one with locally bred animals that includes an amazing assortment of birds, the best food and lots of information.

Launching the business wasn't easy. "In 1979, I was a nonentity financially," she recalls. "I was a four-letter word: wife. I had no financial existence in my own name. That's what it was like."

She connected with a group of women business owners in Rockville who were dealing with the same issues. "I'm 73 today. Women Business Owners was

an organization that formed in 1980, and the stories that you will hear out of the people that were in that group originally are amazing," she says. "We formed an organization because we were desperate for somebody to talk to who had employees, who paid rent, who had to negotiate."

"Had my parents not loaned me the money, I could not have opened the store," she says. "Isn't that interesting? Younger generations have no idea. They don't know what it was like literally in the dark ages for a woman trying to do anything of consequence."

Hanessian opened Animal Exchange in the old Ritchie Center on Aug. 5, 1979. Her mother, a retired math teacher, joined her and kept the books until she turned 95. "After three years, we doubled in size," says Hanessian, "because it was clear that people were hungry for information about pets and appropriate materials."

That hunger continues today with a customer showing up before the store opens, desperate for hamster food. "Why did she come here for hamster food?" says Hanessian. "Because we sell Lab Blocks, which is what you would feed it in a research facility. I can't even get it through the retail pet trade. I have to drive up to Westminster and I have to buy ten 40-pound bags at a time right now in order to be able to provide my animals and my customers' animals with the best possible diet for their mice and rats and hamsters and gerbils."

Hanessian brings the most current information and materials to her store by being connected to the local research community. "One of the things that I've done is work on oversight committees for research labs. Most people who come in here assume that I'm opposed to research on animals, and I'm totally in favor of research for animals, which is for you and for me and for my dog and for the birds. If you don't do it on the animals, you're flying blind."

Hanessian's research connections have benefited Animal Exchange associates, too. She recommended nationally ranked bunny breeder Eve Waters, who sold bunnies to the store, for an intern position at the National Eye Institute

of NIH, where Hanessian serves on the committee. Waters is interning there for a second summer now, following completion of her first year of veterinary school at Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine.

Pet people are the best people in the world, Hanessian says, but adds that animals are sometimes treated better by scientists who understand their specific needs. For 33 years, she has been working to close that gap between love and knowledge, strengthening the human-animal bond. [424pets.com](http://424pets.com)

### Shaking It Up CoMMotion

Bonnie Slawson created her first dance company, Motion Mania Dance Theatre, 24 years ago. In 1988, the dance world was segregated into neat little boxes—ballet, jazz, modern, tap. Dancers specialized in one form and seldom crossed over.

The rules for training and body size and type were just as limiting.

"My style is eclectic and very powerful," Slawson explains. "I couldn't find dancers who could do what I needed as a choreographer. So I decided to create my own company."

She's been "joy in motion" ever since.

Fueled by the belief that "dance has no boundaries," Slawson approaches choreography and teaching on a spiritual plane, encouraging her dancers to draw from their center or core and choreographing dance in the moment as inspired by the day's music and the dancers assembled. She sees in patterns and is able to create beautiful moving designs.

But her dance, teaching and choreography are grounded in education and more education, spurred on by an inquiring mind.

"I came out dancing," Slawson laughs, explaining that she started dancing at the

Bonnie Slawson and Dawn Hessler  
of CoMMotion



age of three. Growing up in New York City and its suburbs, Slawson trained in the city and saw lots of Broadway shows with her mother.

While attending Mercyhurst College, where she received a Bachelor of Arts, Slawson battled prejudice common then in the dance world. A petite powerhouse of a woman who by anyone's account is slender, Slawson was told that she wasn't thin enough and that with those thighs she couldn't jump. At the time, she was lighter than she is today. "To prove them wrong, I became the best jumper," Slawson says. Today, her jumps are one of her signature moves.

It was the same in Los Angeles. Dancers were expected to fit certain molds, and Slawson found this ignorant. "Everybody can dance," she says, "any size or any age."

She was teaching at a studio on Venice Boulevard and living like a starving artist when the studio director asked her if she would take over teaching a six-week summer camp in the Rockies. The director couldn't do it, and she told Slawson, "I like your teaching style."

"I said, 'You're going to pay me and give me a place to sleep and food—sure!'" Slawson laughs, adding, "I had never been to summer camp before, and I loved it!"

She continued to teach while dancing in professional dance companies and choreographing videos, stage shows, industrials and concert works in L.A. and the D.C. area.

And she built Motion Mania. The studio, which was located in Gaithersburg, trained a generation of dancers, many of whom now dance professionally in New York and elsewhere. "I'll take classes in New York, and it's neat—I run into dancers who I trained years ago."

Two years ago, Motion Mania morphed into CoMMotion and moved to Germantown's Wisteria Drive, right down the street from Lotte Plaza. Dawn Hessler, who had been teaching with Bonnie for 11 years, is its co-founder and leads the studio with Slawson in its expanded focus on cutting-edge fitness. Some 200 students take Pilates, including the second-generation Stott Pilates used by physical therapists to modify regimens to individual needs, TRX suspension training that strengthens muscle without straining joints, cage fitness mixed martial arts, and



hypergravity whole body vibration training that raises metabolism, helps with bone density and lengthens muscle. "It's used throughout Europe," Slawson says of the \$5,000 hypergravity machine. "But no one else has one in this area."

Slawson sees the additional fitness focus as a way of protecting her dancers. When one overworks a muscle, the hypergravity machine is there. "The dancers strengthen their bodies with cross training," she emphasizes. "We want to avoid knee and joint problems."

CoMMotion has more than 150 dance students, and offers all forms of dance from jazz, tap and ballet, to hip hop, contemporary and Zumba. There's even poms, tumbling for dancers, breakdance and a summer camp. "It's all good," says Slawson, who teaches to the individual dancer and not through a set syllabi. "No two people learn alike," she says. "To me, that's when you're really mastering teaching—when you can figure out what someone needs and give it to them."

How does she get it all done? Twelve hour days and work on the weekends, she explains, for both herself and her co-director Dawn Hessler. "But it's all good," she says. *commotion.me*

### Leader of the Pack Doggies' Den

Suburbia is peopled with working households—commuters whose time on the road is much longer than mileage merits. Family dogs while away the hours

at home. When parents return, they're knocked over by bounding canine energy and sometimes greeted with a mess.

This surfeit of canine energy trapped indoors is a modern-day dilemma, and one that Jeff LaBrec, owner of Doggies' Den, has been solving for nearly 10 years. Parents from as far away as West Virginia drop their canine kids off at his Germantown Center daycare on their way into work. Doggies' Den is the only daycare in the area to open at 6 a.m., and it doesn't close its doors until 7 p.m. Monday through Friday. As a Montgomery County native, LaBrec knows that getting on the road early saves commuting time.

And LaBrec is no stranger to long hours. He worked as a pool contractor before opening his own pressure washing business. "As a business owner, you have to put in 100 percent to get 100 percent back," he says.

But the daycare is much more than a business for him.

After a car accident, LaBrec didn't want to return to his pressure washing business. His black lab, Casey, was attending a Rockville daycare with a friend's dog, and the two weren't happy in what was a pretty small space. LaBrec and his friend, Amy White, decided that they could do better.

When the partners opened Doggies' Den, LaBrec was prepared for the long hours and drain on his savings. "You have to realize that it will take you at least a year before you're in the black," he says. It

was hard on his partner, and after about 8 months, LaBrec bought her out.

Since that first year, LaBrec has seen Doggies' Den grow 7 to 12 percent annually, a trend that has only slowed in the last two years of the recession. This may be because LaBrec really loves his canine kids and creates the best environment for them.

"The key is knowing today the 38 different personalities that I'm going to be taking care of," he says. "They've all got friends that they like. There's no alpha dog out of the 160 some dogs that come here."

Doggies' Den is located in a brightly painted open space. Dogs big and small enjoy time with each other, share toys and even a kiddie playset. In the entry hall, cubbyholes neatly labeled with name and photo hold leashes and lunch. But there's no communal lunch at this daycare. Kids eat one at a time in the kitchen.

"The dogs that don't get lunch, they get brought out and get a treat or two and put back in so they don't feel left out," explains LaBrec. "And every day it's mixed up. It's not like one dog eats first all the time because that would develop in the dog, I'm the alpha. I'm eating first."

LaBrec can accommodate up to 70 dogs, but on this Wednesday morning he has 38. Dogs bark and turn toward LaBrec when he leaves the daycare floor. "Easy, Honey," "Sammy, it's OK," he soothes. When the barking increases, he whistles and the dogs quiet down.

LaBrec, who has worked as a trainer and has 50 hours' worth of vet tech training, counts 800 canine kids in

Doggies' Dens' 10 years. "Also in that period, I've only had to have four dogs leave," he says. "I told the parents, 'Your dog is just not having fun here.' The biggest thing that will break my heart is if somebody isn't having fun in my daycare." Canine aggression hasn't been a problem for LaBrec, primarily because he interviews each dog and owner before acceptance.

The barking has started again, but then something beautiful happens. The group starts to howl. "They're just singing and talking to each other and acting out," explains LaBrec.

It's a sound not often heard in suburbia. "It's just the pack talking," he says, "like the wolf pack in the wild." [www.doggiesden.com](http://www.doggiesden.com)

### **Striking a Chord** **International School of Music**

The school is Inja Stanic's melody, and it's one that captures many moods—passionate and musically rich, playful and nurturing. But beneath this magical melody runs a resounding chord: "I love being part of the community and providing this to the community," Stanic says.

Music has long been her passion and calling. The daughter of diplomats from the former Yugoslavia, Stanic came to the D.C. area in 1989. She received a B.A. in music performance from the University of Maryland and an M.A. from American University, following her two-year fellowship there as an accompanist. Today, she's an interna-

tionally acclaimed pianist and talented teacher.

But her opus is The International School of Music (ISM). Stanic founded it just eight years ago in 2004, and the school has grown from 40 students in one location to 1400 students in two locations. When she started, Stanic says she thought, "If we ever get to 500, I think that will be a dream come true. Here we are three times bigger and still growing. Obviously, there is a need."

Today, the school fulfills many needs. Stanic says that she listened to parents and students and grew her school to accommodate all manner of musicians and families. Students, preschool through adult, can study practically any instrument, and they can choose the intensity of that study by enrolling in the evaluation or certificate programs.

Teaching styles offered by faculty, who number 100, are diverse. "It's not just old-school Russian teachers but also fun and nurturing teachers," says Stanic. This promotes the best student-teacher fit. "We let students try different teachers because it's really important to have the right match," she says. "Then they'll have a good experience with it and stay for a long time."

When asked what she loves most about leading a music school, Stanic immediately replies, "working with people and the community. Honestly, I never even dreamed about having all of these teachers as part of our faculty, which I am really most proud of—this incredible talent from all over the world. We have



**Joshua and  
Isaiah Okoroji-  
Shaeffer play  
with teacher  
Casey Smith.**



**Inja Stanic of  
International  
School of Music**

musicians, we have doctors, we have Master's degree people. They're people who have performed at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center Opera and given concerts around the world, and they all have a passion for teaching."

One such musician is renowned American soprano Meghan McCall. She teaches voice at ISM and says "the school offers everything I wish I had as a growing musician when I was beginning my journey in music. If I have a young singer who loves to sing pop music, it is so easy for me to walk down the hall and ask a guitar instructor if perhaps he has a guitar student who would like to collaborate. This kind of ensemble training is so important for musicians, and it's so easy to put together at the school."

In coming years, Stanic contemplates branching out further into the community, perhaps sending teachers to satellite locations and augmenting her faculty presence in the public schools. ISM currently runs afterschool programs at Pyle Middle School and Burning Tree Elementary School, and participates widely in MCPS Career Day.

Her advice to entrepreneurs just starting out is to grow conservatively and not risk too much, be flexible, do your research and offer high-quality service. "I think a lot of people think that it has to be a completely original idea," Stanic observes, "and a music school is not a new idea. But I think providing good service, quality service and good customer service makes all the difference."

[www.ismw.org](http://www.ismw.org)

## Head and Shoulders Above The Piggyback Rider

It's romantic, the thought of being an inventor, and it's seductive, the dream of getting rich quick. But the reality of creating an innovative product and bringing it to market is exhilarating in entirely different ways.

"We not only invented a new product," says Wayne Lifshitz who with his brother Jonny created and launched The Piggyback Rider in 2010, "we invented a whole new category."

Three years ago, Wayne and Jonny, living in Bethesda and Lexington, Kentucky, respectively, were both having the same problem. Their three-year-olds would start out walking but quickly tire,

and they didn't want to get into the stroller anymore. While the brothers enjoyed carrying their children and showing them the world, this resulted in aching backs. Backpacks were heavy and put the kids to sleep. Piggyback rides were awkward and didn't leave the dads' hands free.

They needed a better way, so they created one. "It was inspired by need," says Wayne. "There was nothing on the market."

The Piggyback Rider weighs all of 3.5 pounds and is ergonomically sound. A tempered aluminum bar lets a child of up to 60 pounds stand up and positions the center of weight over the adult's hips. The child is strapped to the adult, and child hand holds are located on the shoulder pads, preventing little hands from clutching at adult necks. Plus, kids don't fall asleep! Standing up on an adult's back, a kid is guaranteed an exciting adventure with an excellent view.

Getting from idea to first small shipment arrival in the U.S. took only 18 months.

"We're just a couple of really smart guys," says Wayne, explaining how they researched, created and launched a product so quickly. "Google is a very, very powerful tool for the small business guy."

The two already had one invention under their belts, the Wrist List magnetized shopping list that went from refrigerator door to wrist and store, so they knew something about the process. And the brothers had always been tinkers,



**Brothers Bryan and  
Wayne Lifshitz of  
The Piggyback Rider**

admits Wayne, "taking things apart and playing with Legos."

These days, Wayne is in humanitarian relief and international development. Jonny is a traumatic brain injury researcher. Both used their professional strengths to mold The Piggyback Rider. And they called in brother Bryan, who owns a creative media firm in Phoenix, Arizona, for help in getting the word out.

The Piggyback Rider was featured on "Good Morning America," just in time for Father's Day this June. They've been really good in getting the word out.

Wayne attributes this to Bryan's materials and the brothers' marketing strategy, not only educating consumers about why they need this but certain "guerilla marketing techniques" that have really paid off.

They launched The Piggyback Rider in the kids market first, attending lots of trade shows and using these as their focus groups. At one show, they got lucky.

"This guy came up to us and said that one of his friends would love one," Wayne recalls. We hesitated to just give it away. "But then he said his friend was a celebrity, so we took a chance."

Turns out that friend was Dean McDermott, husband of Tori Spelling. Not only did Tori Spelling blog about The Piggyback Rider, but two days later, it was picked up on PerezHilton.com and soon made it to People.com.

The brothers sent Piggyback Riders to every celebrity with a toddler, hoping for more positive feedback. Their invention was soon mentioned by name in OK! Magazine when Leiv Shreiber and Naomi Watts used it in Manhattan and were captured in a full-page photo.

"It catches your eye. It's very different," says Wayne, noting that this strategy wouldn't work for something more ordinary or a product that is used indoors.

For this reason, Wayne sometimes takes his own child for a ride in downtown Bethesda or through the roomy Great Beginnings in Gaithersburg, where The Piggyback Rider is sold locally. "It's classic guerilla marketing," he says. "Sometimes I bribe my child with an ice cream cone."

This month, The Piggyback Rider is rolling out new models. Check them out at Great Beginnings, [www.greatbeginningsonline.com](http://www.greatbeginningsonline.com), or Piggyback Rider, <http://piggybackrider.com>

