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[Survivor Products/Businesses]

women's work

BY DIANA PRICE

Trust Your Journey

WHEN BETH BROWNLEE AND RUTH NICHOLS promote their company brand—Trust Your Journey—their personal experiences give them the insight to do so, knowing that, as Beth says, “there are fortunes and misfortunes in every life. The rain and sunshine in each of our journeys are there for a purpose.” But Beth also knows that sometimes the clouds can cover the sun, and when this happens insight and inspiration are more important than ever.

In 2004 Beth was struggling through rounds of dose-dense chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer when the darkness in her own life seemed overwhelming. It was at that point, as she fought for hope against both the physical affects of her aggressive treatment and the emotional impact of the battle, that she recalled the three words a friend had shared two weeks prior: “trust your journey.” It was then, Beth says, that she realized that “this moment was just part of my journey and not my entire journey.” From that knowledge, she says, she was able to move up and on with her treatment and her life.

It was also from the profound affect of those words that Trust Your Journey (TYJ)—the company Beth cofounded in the aftermath of her cancer treatment—emerged. Having worked for years in sales management for sportswear and outdoor retail companies, Beth and Ruth—who was at the time a colleague at Columbia



Beth Brownlee, left, and Ruth Nichols



Sportswear and had just lost her husband—were both ready to make a change. It was Ruth, Beth says, who said, “It was time to go and do something wonderful with these three simple words that had changed our lives.” And with that decision, what had been the most challenging time for both women became the biggest opportunity.

In November 2007, after working together to create a brand that would “remind women daily to be grateful for what they have but mindful of what they can become,” Beth and Ruth launched Trust-YourJourney.com, an online source for sportswear (all 100 percent organic), jewelry, and accessories featuring the three words that had been so inspirational for both women. From the beginning, Beth says, the friends’ vision was to create a place that would provide women with products that acknowledge and honor the inner strength that they possess and would also serve as an online community for women who were facing challenges. “We wanted women to know they are never alone no matter what they are going through,” Beth says.

Now a year since their launch, Beth and Ruth know that the message they offer women is striking a chord. “We get e-mails and cards from women who are facing all kinds of challenges in their lives,” Beth says. “I think they find strength, faith, and hope in these words.” And survivors, especially, seem to tune into the significance of the empowering mantra that the brand offers. At a recent young survivor event, Beth says, the response from the women who felt the power of the TYJ message was incredible; but, she says, the real gift was the inspiration those young women offered the company’s cofounders: they “truly touched our hearts. We have such great admiration for their courage. We stay in touch with them, and they continue to inspire us daily. Survivors are our heroes!”

Empowered themselves by the brave women who gather on their site and proudly wear their brand, Beth and Ruth look forward to continuing on the path that their own hearts have chosen through adversity and to reaching more women through their work: “My soul tells me every day that I have a purpose in this life,” Beth says, “just as everyone does. It is important to listen closely to your heart, for I have always believed it has the purest answers and the best directions for your destiny.”

For more information about Trust Your Journey, visit www.trustyourjourney.com.



Pristine Recovery

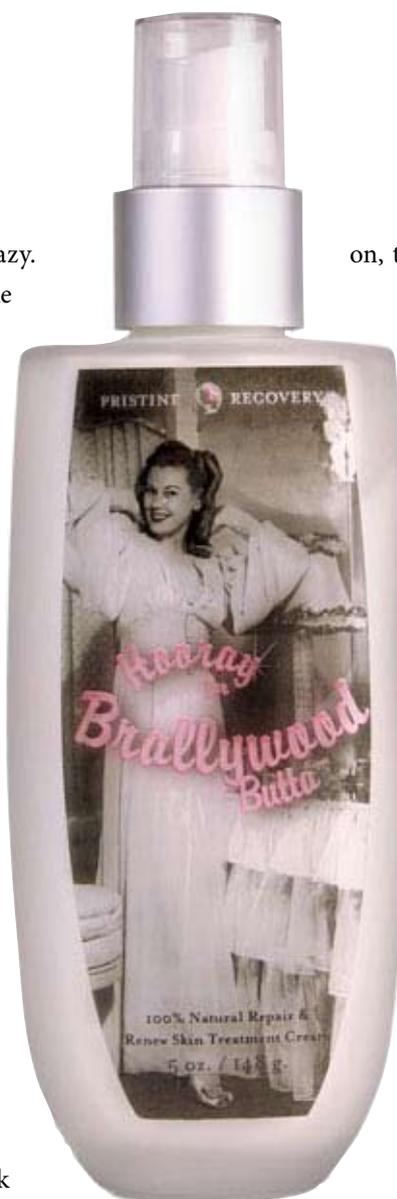
BLAIRE KESSLER thought she knew a thing or two about beauty products before she was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 31. As a model for many years (and Miss Winston Cup/NASCAR 1998), Blaire had spent some time considering her personal appearance. But five months after the birth of her daughter Dylan in 2005, when she received her diagnosis and began treatment—which included a double mastectomy followed by Lupron® (leuprolide, a form of chemotherapy) shots every three months for three years and tamoxifen (Nolvadex®) for a little over four years—Blaire found that nothing she had been using to care for her skin and hair was working to combat the side effects she was experiencing.

“Before I was diagnosed with cancer, I had always had really long, pretty blond hair,” Blaire says, “and almost instantly after I began

treatment I noticed a difference. It was crazy. One minute my hair was soft and manageable and the next it was frizzy, breaking off, and literally resembled a Brillo pad.” Eager to do something about the changes in her physical appearance, Blaire took a hard look at the ingredients listed on the pretty products she had been using faithfully for years—and she didn’t like what she found: long lists of chemicals. “I had never looked at the ingredients on the luscious creams I slathered one after another all over my hair and body until now,” she says. “After that day I changed everything. I began researching all the words I couldn’t pronounce and learned what phthalates and parabens were.” The result of her research confirmed her initial instinct: these chemicals were not something she wanted to risk using any longer on her body or her hair.

But finding 100 percent natural products that would help ease the effects of her treatment was not easy—a realization that took her back to the library for more research. This time, after poring over ancient remedies from Native American, Egyptian, African, Sanskrit Indian, and Grecian cultures, Blaire emerged with a list of natural ingredients and the determination to create her own products. “I turned my kitchen into a laboratory,” she says of the work that led to what were initially remedies created only for her own use. “I can’t even cook, but when you’re desperate you can do anything.”

What Blaire ultimately created, after much trial and error, were several key products that made a huge difference in her appearance—and therefore her self-confidence. “My hair, which had been so fragile and thin, was growing again and felt much stronger. The red scars on my chest were fading, and my overall skin was glowing because I was using my cream all over. As time went



on, things were just getting better and better.” It was Blaire’s husband, Rod, who not only noticed the difference—to Blaire’s great joy—but also suggested the idea of making the products available to other women.

In August 2008 Blaire launched Pristine Beauty (www.shoppristinebeauty.com), where she now sells the moisturizer, deodorant, and hair serum formulas that she developed herself—all 100 percent natural—under the brand name Pristine Recovery. Blaire’s a devoted fan of old Hollywood, so the Web site and product names pay homage to a bygone era of glamour; and despite the serious nature of the research behind the product line and the profoundly healing effect it offers, there is a lighthearted vibe to the public face of the business that speaks to Blaire’s sense of fun and her love of the beauty industry.

Though there have been challenges along the way—finding the right manufacturer and packaging that would align with her vision of creating truly natural, organic, and recyclable products has been tricky—Blaire has not allowed these bumps in the road to diminish her enthusiasm. Her love for the work she’s doing now is evident as she describes the joy her journey has brought her and her hopes for the future of the business. “The biggest reward is hearing the fantastic feedback we are getting from the people who are using the products,” Blaire says. “We have only just begun this journey. I envision great things for Pristine Beauty (the umbrella company that owns Pristine Recovery). Helping people find all-natural alternatives to chemical-laden cosmetics drives me.”

For more information about Pristine Beauty, visit www.shoppristinebeauty.com.



The Original Healing Threads

Anyone who has spent a considerable amount of time in a hospital gown and has fought to pull the material together to actually cover the body knows that the garment was not designed with the comfort of the patient in mind. The gowns serve a purpose for efficiency, maybe, but there's no doubt that most patients' dignity is lost along with their body heat as they endure their drafty waits in these unfortunate garments.

Peg Feodoroff solved the dilemma during her own radiation treatments for melanoma by wearing a sweater set to each radiation appointment—her melanoma was on her arm, and she could easily wait for her session in the full set, remove the cardigan and be treated while wearing the short-sleeved sweater, and put the cardigan on again when she finished—no gown required for the wait. But she knew that not everyone had such an easy answer, and one particularly long day in the waiting room showed her clearly how uncomfortable patients were made by wearing the gowns. Men and

women sat self-consciously together in the crowded room, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Adults who had walked into the room as confident professionals became defined by their illness and their discomfort. It was then, Peg says, that she said to herself, This is an outrage! Someone should do something about this!

But it wasn't until her one of her sisters, Claire, was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer a short time later that the idea to do something really took off. The incentive was Claire's wish to own a business. "She said she had a list of three things she had always wanted to do," Peg says of a conversation the sisters had shortly after Claire's diagnosis. Included on that list was owning her own business. That was all Peg and her other sister, Patty, needed to hear; they were going to make it happen. In the spring of 2005, the three sisters launched Spirited Sisters, Inc., with the mission of enhancing the environment in which people diagnosed with cancer are asked to heal and recover. Their first project? The hospital gown, which they would create under the label The Original Healing Threads.

The goal, Peg says, was to create garments that would "provide women with the opportunity to maintain their modesty and dignity while undergoing any sort of medical treatments. We also wanted them to feel empowered while wearing the Original Healing Threads." This sense of empowerment, the sisters hoped, would help lead women to ask questions, inquire about the best possible treatments, and be truly proactive about their health. In the same way that they would take ownership of the beautiful and practical new gown they were choosing, they could "take ownership of their bodies and how they were being treated."

The sisters pooled their talents to build the company. Patty, a psychologist in Atlanta, brought her experience working with patients in cancer treatment centers; Claire brought years of sales and marketing experience and wrote the company's sales and marketing plan; and Peg, who had run a commercial interior design company for 25 years, brought knowledge of fabric and sewing. A young friend of Peg's who had just earned a degree in fashion design took Peg's sketches and turned them into prototypes. The result was a fashionable, jacket-style garment made from soft, microfiber material that provides easy access for treatment and yet maintains coverage for modesty.

Following the initial design and planning, in a lucky turn of events Spirited Sisters received a considerable public relations (PR) boost

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In Her Own Words: The Safepole Story

By Cari Lynn Ugent

My entire twenties were spent with cancer. Sure, other things marked my twenties—graduate school, boyfriends, breaking up with boyfriends, city life with friends, friends getting married, my first article in print, my first book contract—but there was always cancer, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and no matter what I tried, it refused to stay away for long.

At times the cancer would pose itself as an impetus for action, sparking a fearlessness in me. But at other times it was a cold shadow following me, darkening every big plan, every major decision. And then the cancer could become a tornado, forcing me to disappear from normal life and take cover. But never did I anticipate that cancer would influence me to invent a medical product and build a company around it.

It all started on the eve of my thirtieth birthday, when I arrived at Northwestern Memorial Hospital for a stem cell transplant. After exhausting every available treatment, the transplant was my only remaining option. I had an excellent medical team, and my only sibling was a perfect donor-match, so there was hope that this could actually provide a cure.

But I knew what would happen if it didn't. I was terrified and overwhelmed. And it certainly didn't help that I was hooked to a rickety IV pole that quickly became a mass of tangled cords following me into the shower, tripping me and my nurses, stub-

bing my swollen feet, threatening to yank out the central lines stitched into my chest and arms, and nearly toppling over a dozen times a day.

As time went on, the IV pole became more than just an irritant—my height of indignity came after a month: I was growing weak and had trouble unplugging four infusion pumps and making it to bathroom in time. When my nurse said the solution was a commode, I sadly shook my head—to have a potty brought into my room simply because of a dysfunctional IV pole was not a "solution."

And then, the last straw: it was the most dangerous peak of the transplant. I'd spiked a fever, my immune system was nonexistent, and while reaching for the morphine button I slit my finger on a dirty screw protruding from the IV pole. All this time I'd been obsessively careful not to expose myself to germs or infection—I didn't have visitors, I couldn't get flowers, I couldn't brush my teeth, I hand-sanitized religiously, I wore my face mask any time I left my room—and now this? Horrified, I looked at my bloody finger. I didn't know if I was going to make it through the transplant, but I knew that I could try to do something to make just one aspect better for future patients.

As a journalist it was natural for me to begin interviewing my nurses and doctors as well as other patients. "Does the IV pole make everyone this miserable?" I asked, and their answers were astounding. Everyone rattled



off horror stories of accidents and injuries, how the poles tip, how people trip over the "spider legs," and the harrowing prizewinner: a patient was on a gurney in the elevator, but the IV pole was dragging behind and...you guessed it...the doors closed.

I was now on a mission, and there was no turning back. Everyone who came into my room was subjected to questions, from housekeeping ("What would make cleaning the poles easier?") to the transporters ("What would help 'reign in' the pole?"). People's faces lit up, and they couldn't wait to talk; it was clear everyone wanted to see improvement.

My mission wasn't just about an IV pole, though; this project was a way for me to focus on something positive rather than on all the fears and rigors of cancer treatment. Fast-forward a year: all signs pointed to success of the transplant, and I was finally

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Healing Threads

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when Peg's daughter took news of the sisters' venture to her boss, who happened to own a leading fashion PR company in New York City. "He was floored by the story and the concept," Peg says. In fact, he offered to do PR for Healing Threads at a reduced rate, and soon the company was featured in *Women's Wear Daily*; *People*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; *Health*; *Women's Health*; the *Sunday New York Times* style section, and other major publications. "There were many other happy coincidences within the family that led us to believe that this company was supposed to be started and was meant to be successful," Peg says. "We believe that it will change people's lives, and we know it already has."

In fact, the feedback has been inspiring. Though Claire passed away as a result of colon cancer in 2006, the knowledge that the business the sisters created together continues to bring other survivors dignity and joy fuels Spirited Sisters today: When we get feedback from survivors, Peg says, "it makes us want to try harder and persevere so that every woman knows she has an option as to what to wear when she is treated."

For more information about The Original Healing Threads, visit www.healingthreads.com

The Safepole Story

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getting my life back after a long recuperation. I was also the holder of a patent for an innovative IV pole called Safepole that was ergonomic and tip-resistant, had numerous safety features, and could be made in bright, cheery colors. Forward another couple of years: after extensive work with engineers and several prototypes, we sold out of our first run—powder blue Safepoles—in a week.

And then, miraculously, it all came full circle. Admittedly, I'd never thought about having patents or a company; all I'd thought about was making something better. That day arrived when I walked into Northwestern, to the unit where I had had my transplant, and, surrounded by my favorite nurses, gave a Safepole to a patient.

Cari Lynn Ugent is the author of three books of narrative nonfiction and holds a master's degree in writing from Johns Hopkins University. She is also the founder and the president of Chicago-based Safepole LLC.