

Zero to business champ in three years

Young entrepreneur proves the skeptics wrong

By Tom Keyser - Business Edge

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Shortly after 19-year-old Amanda Harburn opened her own dance studio in a southwest Calgary storefront, one of her corporate neighbours caught her by surprise.

"We all have bets on how long you'll survive," revealed her fellow free-enterpriser.

"Well, I hope you're betting I'll be here for a long time," was Amanda's cheerful rejoinder.

"Nope," said the man from a few doors down. "I bet against you."



Larry MacDougal, Business Edge

Amanda Harburn beat the odds in launching Prestige Dance Academy.

There's not much chance the doubter will collect on his wager. In less than three years, Canada's outstanding student entrepreneur has gone from zero pupils to almost 400 and counting. She's 100-per-cent debt free, is turning a respectable profit and has recently added a second dance floor. Meanwhile, ballerinas-to-be are lining up to enrol in Harburn's Prestige Dance Academy, at 3715 51 St. S.W.

Earlier this year, the Dr. E.P. Scarlett High School grad pulled a major coup when a national panel of senior bankers, chief executives and business journalists presented her with the CIBC Student Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

(Later, one panelist admitted he originally found it hard to take the fledgling studio operator seriously – until she dazzled the judges with her presentation, her savoir faire, her airtight business plan and her encouraging revenues.)

"At times, it's been hard to make people believe in me," said Harburn, now 22 and poised to graduate from Mount Royal College's Bissett School of Business (bachelor of applied business and entrepreneurship) in December.

The bankers didn't. She had no track record and no credit rating when she asked for a startup loan. They showed her the door.

The contractors who installed her sprung (and costly) dance floor didn't show much respect, either. "I don't think they would have treated me the way they did if my dad had been here."

But her MRC instructors never stopped believing in Amanda Harburn. Nor did her fellow students, nor her parents, Don and Pat Harburn, who've remained behind her every step of the way.

A born entrepreneur, Harburn took her first dance lesson at three and stuck with it through adolescence, eventually taking part-time jobs as a student instructor and even hiring on as a studio cleaning-lady/caretaker.

One night a week, she worked in the office, acquainting herself with rudiments of basic accounting while acquiring important administrative experience.

One summer, she and another youthful instructor opened a holiday dance camp. Things turned out well.

"I had a business mind and once I realized I loved working with kids, I just put them together," she said.

In 2002, it happened, thanks to the fiscal backing of her family as well as large amounts of volunteer elbow grease.

After Amanda researched her competition throughout the city, a statistical analysis indicated that the booming Westhills/Signal Hill area of Calgary's southwestern quadrant was the place to set up. Expanding communities. Young upscale families. And plenty of disposable income.

Team Harburn spent about \$20,000 to transform an ordinary storefront into a professional studio (Amanda's dad performed drywalling duties free of charge) and the teenage entrepreneur opened for business.

Initial problem: No customers. Looking back, Harburn acknowledges a serious mistake was made when she spent her entire promotional budget the wrong way, hiring a marketing firm that failed to drum up results.

"You learn and you fail and you try again," she shrugged. "I was devastated, though. I'm thinking, 'That was all the money I had set aside for marketing and now it's gone.'"

Today her marketing cash goes to Canada Post, which twice a year delivers Prestige Dance Academy flyers to homes in her target neighbourhoods. Returns have been more than encouraging. Harburn's enrolment has quadrupled in less than three years.

Apart from coaching a star student through the all-important task of drafting a business plan, meanwhile, instructors at the Bissett School have been supportive in dozens of other ways.

Like all small-business operators, Harburn had to learn how to deal with the occasional disappointed customer, as well as with the odd NSF cheque. The advice of her MRC mentors has proven invaluable on a dozen occasions.

In the main, though, her instincts have carried Harburn through. She sticks to high standards, limiting class size to a maximum 10 pupils. Meanwhile, she appreciates the fact her business doesn't require her to maintain an expensive inventory.

And the fact that students normally commit to a 10-month course of instruction allows Harburn to plan for financial contingencies.

It's hard to imagine anyone betting against her now.

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