

ALBANY BUSINESS REVIEW

WOMEN WHO MEAN BUSINESS



“When I was a little girl, there were only three things they thought we could do: be a teacher, be a secretary or be a nurse. I always said, ‘I want to be the boss, I don’t want to be the secretary.’”

Sandra Beck is the founder of Tidy Tots Diapers.

SANDRA BECK

After she built and sold a software company, Sandra Beck arrived at an idea that would fulfill two of her passions: helping people with disabilities and doing something to help the environment. That idea was a new cloth diaper – and Tidy Tots was born.

Sandra Beck co-founded a software company, spent nearly two decades building it up and then sold the company in 2000.

Her next act was something very different. She was a longtime environmentalist. She also was part of several groups that worked with autistic children and their parents, and she felt compelled to help them.

Beck merged those passions into one idea: a better brand of cloth diapers.

It's a product that wouldn't clog landfills and would be made at Pine Ridge Industries in Scotia, a factory staffed by Schenectady ARC.

That was the genesis of Tidy Tots Diapers, though it would take years of research and design and filing patents around the world before she would start producing her product.

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How did you get started in software? I was the controller for a company in the late '70s, and we bought a new computer system from a gentleman. It was rigged with holes, and I worked with him nights and weekends to fix the holes. Within two years, we decided to start a company together – I understood the checks and balances and accounting, he understood the programming. In the early '90s, we worked for many companies, almost every country club ran our software, almost all the car dealers ran our software. Once the big-box stores came in and they had their own software and everyone started having verticals, I said to my partner, we're going to go out of business if we don't have our own vertical.

So what did you do? I went to Pacific Pools and asked them if they wanted to be the No. 1 seller of pool liners in five years, and they said yes, so we created a vertical for them. They went from 3,000 liners to 185,000 liners. I went to another client, the owner of Duane's Toyland, and created one. They ended up buying us out a few years later. I was like, "Oh my God, I just sold my company!" I cried so much I needed an eyepatch at the time; it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. And then I thought, what am I going to do?

And diapers was your answer? I wanted to do something for the environment, and one of the worst offenders is disposable diapers. Nobody talks about it, but 27.6 billion go into landfills every year. While I was home, a friend of mine knew a group of women with autistic children. I had been on the board of Shaker Ridge Country Club and I ran many events and I thought I could help them. One of the mothers said – and this absolutely broke my heart – "If only my child knew that I loved him." And from that moment on I decided I was going to do something to help. It was my mission.

So you started looking into cloth diapers. I took it on just like I would have taken on writing a piece of software. I ordered every cloth diaper I could find. In 2004, I started focus groups and found there was really no good cloth diaper out there. I filed for my first patent in 2007.

What makes Tidy Tots different from other diapers? There are fatal flaws with most cloth diapers. First is they leak. There's not much to stop what we call blowouts on the side. We made our own elastic for the tops and sides of our cover – rated for medical so it's breathable but totally waterproof – and it wicks

BACKGROUND

Age: 68

Family: Husband, Dr. Gerald Beck; daughter, Sara Rudin, works at Tidy Tots; two stepchildren and two grandchildren

Born: Utica

Lives in: Lake George; lives in Schenectady during the week to be closer to work

Education: Graduated from SUNY Oswego

On the resume: Founded International Software Sales Inc. and sold it in 2000; ran her own consulting firm until she started Tidy Tots in 2010

TIDY TOTS LLC

12

employees through Schenectady ARC

100,000

components produced last year for Tidy Tots' various products

400,000

components expected to be produced this year, which includes new lines of masks and washable medical isolation gowns

and seals. One of our main components is a flushable secure liner, we bridged the gap between cloth and disposable, makes it easy to clean. It's made from organic hemp which is antimicrobial, so it won't smell like a gym. And you don't have to do stripping, which is usually an all-day process with other cloth diapers.

What brought you to the Schenectady ARC? I met the people from this organization on a Friday, I looked at the facility on Monday, and on Tuesday 17 of my palettes arrived. I chose Pine Ridge because it's a loving place where everyone here really cares, they care about the workers. My job is to train them so they can go out in the community. I miss them when they're gone, but that's what my job is, to help them learn skills, that's why I'm here and what gives me the most joy.

How do you market your product? We're about 80% on Facebook. We do send our product to bloggers and have them do a review, which brings people to our page.

What's the biggest challenge your business faces? It's funding for marketing, and I'm looking for a small investor now. If you can spend \$1,000 a day, it's the magic number, we tested it for a time and it worked fabulously, but we couldn't sustain it. We've had a lot of help and small grants, CEG, Fuzehub, state programs, NYSID, but we're competing with people who can spend thousands a day on marketing. A small amount of money makes a huge difference for us.

How long do you want to continue doing this? My goal is to hit the magic number of sales where I can go to a giant like Kimberly Clark or Procter & Gamble and say, "Would you like to buy my company and my patents?" I'd make sure

they manufacture here (at Pine Ridge) for a while and I'd set up foundations for children with autism with the rest of my money. I used to be a golfing maniac; I haven't golfed in 10 years now, because all my focus is here. Trust me, my husband would like me to retire, he's been retired for a while, while I'm still working 80-hour weeks.

But you still get to work with your daughter. I'm so lucky to have her willing to take my dream and help me with it, because this is my dream ... well, I think it's hers now.

– Todd Kehoe

INTERVIEW HAS BEEN EDITED AND CONDENSED