

# The Making of a (Very) Young Entrepreneur – POP Pittsburgh

By: Beth Marcello



March 12, 2008

If entrepreneurs are born, not made, then Pittsburgh was blessed with another inventor when Lani Lazzari, president of [Simple Sugars](#), entered the world a scant 14 years ago. Fortunately (though not at the time), she arrived with bad skin.

Treating the eczema that has plagued this eighth grader practically since birth is the itch that surfaced her entrepreneurial spirit three Christmases ago. That, and the opportunity that knocked when Lazzari's mom, Gina Lazzari, pressed her daughter, who was going on 12 at the time, to make rather than purchase holiday gifts for their family.

"I wanted to create something fun, that smells good and was great to use," says Lazzari, whose problem skin had forced her to resort to using "boring" preservative- and color-free products her entire life.

After researching aromatherapies and oils, at the kitchen sink Lazzari began experimenting with the ingredients she now pours into Simple Sugars' more than two dozen scents of all-natural body, face and foot scrubs. To a cup or so of sugar, she added oil until the mixture "looked wet enough." Then she stirred in the scent. When the first two successful Simple Sugars recipes – almond and vanilla – cleared up her own eczema and her aunt's psoriasis, Lazzari knew she was onto something big.



## Coming Up Roses

Next came Valentine's Day, for which Lazzari created rose and chocolate scrubs. An e-mail her dad circulated at work generated six orders from non-family members. From there, word spread.

Lazzari booked a few home parties, where a UPMC employee saw the scrubs' potential as a corporate gift. Invoicing the medical center required Lazzari to secure a tax identification number, necessitating an attorney, who introduced her to a banker. Carla Frost at [National City](#) invited Lazzari and her mom to be her guests at a luncheon of women entrepreneurs hosted by [PowerLink](#), an organization that matches women business owners with a volunteer board of advisors for one year. A savvy marketer, Lazzari brought a 5-ounce jar of coconut scrub for each of the 30 or so businesswomen who attended. Now, Lazzari is a PowerLink protégé with her own board of advisors.

It's hard to be unimpressed with Lazzari, says Donna Kell, owner of [the Kell Group](#), a medical billing practice, one of Simple Sugars' PowerLink advisors. "Lani's in school, so she doesn't have the same time as the average entrepreneur to devote to building her business," Kell notes. "Most of us put in 80 hours a week, she does 20, but in spite of that she's doing pretty well. She has a million ideas and is just as motivated as other business owners I know, maybe more so."

Geri Mataya, who has 37 years of experience as owner and president of [Spa Uptown](#) is also advising Lazzari. "Successful entrepreneurs are outgoing, assertive and persistent. You keep on trying even when you're met with challenges," Mataya explains. "Lani is all that. So far she's met every challenge we've given her."

One of Lazzari's first PowerLink assignments was to conduct consumer research. She spent a day with Mataya at Spa Uptown, performing hand massages on customers to showcase her products and solicit their feedback. "People are sometimes surprised at the quality of the product because they don't expect it to be professional," Lazzari shares.

Based on the response, Mataya commissioned Lazzari to create a special scent – eucalyptus and spearmint – that is now offered exclusively at Spa Uptown for manicures, pedicures, body scrubs and for sale. "The product is excellent," Mataya says.

### **Simply Successful**

Lazzari's no longer concocting new scrubs one cup at a time at the kitchen sink. She buys oils in five-gallon drums now and her new R&D facility is a small remodeled room in her very supportive



parents' basement. The family room serves as storage.

At night, in between homework and *Dancing with the Stars*, the Ellis School student experiments with new formulas or makes batches of scrub to fill orders. Her largest order to date was for 2,400 foot scrubs for participants in a fundraising walk for ovarian cancer research. By day, her mom and grandma, currently employed as volunteers, fill and label jars. "The Simple Sugars room is small," explains Lazzari. "We can't all be in there at the same time."

Her mom is also her muse. Lazzari, who has two younger brothers, watched Gina, now an entrepreneur herself, lose out on a plum position with a former employer during maternity leave. As a result, Lazzari likes the idea of controlling her own destiny. Her goal for Simple Sugars is to hurdle the elusive million dollar revenue benchmark. While women have been building businesses at twice the rate of men for nearly two decades, according to the [Center for Women's Business Research](#), female entrepreneurs are about half as likely as their male counterparts (3 percent versus 6 percent) to exceed \$1 million in annual sales.



"It's important for more women to have million dollar businesses to show the guys that we are as good if not better," says Lazzari, who also figures that building a successful business will earn her acceptance into a good college and pay for tuition.

In the meantime, she struggles, as all entrepreneurs do, with growing pains. Returning e-mails and phone calls from customers and reporters, developing her [Web site](#) ([www.simplesugarsscrub.com](http://www.simplesugarsscrub.com)), conducting a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis and an action plan for her PowerLink board all take time away from what Lazzari loves most – "experimenting with new scents and what you have to put into the scrubs to make them look right and feel good on your skin." And soon she'll have to hire staff and rent space, which won't be as convenient as working from home.

"It's hard to manage the business and school, but I do manage," says Lazzari, who is also involved in extracurricular school activities, such as the operetta. "If you want to be successful, the business can't be a hobby. I'll keep growing it as long as I can."

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Beth Marcello writes from her own home office in the South Side.