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Value Added: D.C. entrepreneur is ‘Flower Empowered’

Sarah von Pollaro, founder of Urban Petals, inside her Washington home, which she often uses for video shoots. (Tracy A. Woodward/The Washington Post)



By **Thomas Heath** July 29, 2012

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Sarah von Pollaro is a hard-charging Washington entrepreneur who plans to do for flower arranging what Julia Child brought to French cooking and what Martha Stewart did for gracious living.

The 34-year-old Yalie has built a business around flower design parties (I participated in one) and through decorating tables for big-name corporate and association events around Washington.

Thomas Heath is a local business reporter and columnist, writing

Now she wants to go national, following in the footsteps of her idol, cooking legend Child, who became rich and famous with

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about entrepreneurs and various companies big and small in the Washington Metropolitan area. Previously, he wrote about the business of sports for The Post's sports section for most of a decade. He has also covered local news, including the Maryland General Assembly and investigative work in Fairfax county. He has served as a correspondent for Newsweek and The Post, participating in coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, the Unabomber and the O.J. Simpson trial. Heath was born and raised in Syracuse, N.Y., where he attended Catholic schools. He is a graduate of Fordham University and was a 2001-2002 fellow at Columbia University's Knight/Bagehot business fellowship program. [View Archive](#)

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her cooking show — and her imitable high-pitched voice.

Von Pollaro debuts an hour-long show in August titled “Flower Empowered” on Washington’s public television station, WETA on Channel 26 (where my wife works), which will provide tips, tricks and techniques for making your own floral arrangements. To help build her brand, she recently signed a deal with Whole Foods to produce how-to videos, sell flower kits and “spread the joy of flowers.”

I rarely buy or think of flowers, except on anniversaries and special occasions. But my wife, Polly, loves them. And I do know this: A beautiful centerpiece at Thanksgiving or Christmas, or just a nice bouquet, really brighten up the home and make me feel better. I get it. And that’s what von Pollaro is hoping to tap into.

“I am trying to demystify floral design, which has been confined to rich housewives,” said von Pollaro, whose career so far has been built on initiative.

More than the show’s premise, von Pollaro’s secret weapon is likely to be her

outsized personality. To say she is an extrovert is putting it mildly. Her passion is infectious, an essential ingredient in many successful enterprises.

Von Pollaro, who lives with her entrepreneur husband, Sam,

-50%



-70%



-42%



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in Columbia Heights with their 2-year-old son, Theo, isn't exactly starving. The markup on flower arrangements can be as high as 500 percent. I estimate she was pulling down \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year running her one-woman floral design business called Urban Petals.

The St. Louis native developed her passion for flowers spending summers with her grandmother in Wisconsin, roaming through gardens and collecting wildflowers. She later volunteered to design flower arrangements for dinner tables, parties and social events at Yale.

A turning point came during the summer between her junior and senior years, when the mother of one of her friends, who edited a garden magazine in Manhattan, found her an unpaid internship working for some big-time floral designers.

That's where she learned the rudiments of the business. She'd tag along with the designers when they made the rounds, starting about 4 a.m., at the wholesale shops in Manhattan's floral district. Von Pollaro lugged boxes, made deliveries, sorted flowers and snipped thousands of stems.

"You are not sitting on a stool doing dainty work," she said.

Von Pollaro graduated from Yale in 2000 and moved to Washington, where she worked at a couple of nonprofit groups before she decided to see whether she could build a business around her passion for flowers.

Her big idea was selling three-hour, flower design classes — for about \$85 per person — to people who wanted to host parties in their home. Von Pollaro would buy the flowers, bring them in her car and supply the clippers and rubber bands and the paper.

Guests would eat, sip wine and learn about flowers.

A friend suggested the name Urban Petals. She withdrew \$500 in savings to buy a Web site domain name and vases and incorporate as a limited liability corporation. She started the business in June 2004.

She had \$33,641 in sales at the end of the year. She kept expenses to a minimum by working out of her home.

She got a big break the next year when a friend introduced her to an event planner who happened to be working on a huge company gala at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. She quickly pulled together some samples of her work and won the contract, which paid \$145 per table — for 300 tables. She pulled in more than \$40,000 before expenses.

She made more money on that one job than she did in all of 2004.

Another important lesson dawned on the history major: It is easier to make 300 of the same arrangements than to make 50 different arrangements. And the big shows allow her to buy thousands of flowers from wholesalers, reducing her per-unit cost.

“It was scalable,” she said, taking a page from business books. “If I buy 2,000 roses instead of 25, I am going to get a better price.”

She also learned the value of corporate business, and through word of mouth garnered some big clients: Herman Miller, Discovery Communications, Global Event Partners (a big D.C. event company) and the National Building Museum.

Her monthly sales tripled, and by 2008 she was pulling in \$300,000; I estimate more than half was pure profit.

Von Pollaro said timing in the flower business is critical. Flowers are perishable: they ripen, age and die. You have to ladder the purchases so that everything peaks at once; you don’t want shriveling pink roses dropping petals all over your silk table cloth.

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“It’s like making a fruit salad,” said von Pollaro. “You have to time everything.”

Flowers are also a commodity, which means you have to stay on top of prices. A monsoon in Thailand can wipe out the orchid supply and can triple prices within days. You also have to hedge your bets. She once quoted a client a price for lilies before the event. But a week before the event arrived, the

price of the lilies tripled because of a sudden increase in demand.

Lesson learned: “Now I don’t lock in prices and designs until I place the order for the flowers and receive confirmation on price from the wholesalers — about two weeks before an event.”

Von Pollaro smartly keeps costs low. She reuses the boxes the flowers are delivered in for packing her centerpieces. She even recirculates the plastic in which the flowers are wrapped when she buys them. She still works at a studio in her home, and rents space and vans as needed. She has two independent contractors that help her put together her jobs.

Her interest in television came while she was experimenting with a subscription flower service, which included doing weekly how-to videos. When she received massive feedback from customers, von Pollaro saw the possibility in a do-it-yourself show.

“People want to know how to make things on their own,” she said. “There are two frigging channels on cooking. There are whole shows on cupcakes. It’s crazy. Flowers are like food, except they are food for your eyes instead of food for your body.”

She cold-called WETA last year to pitch her idea for a flower show, and followed up with an e-mail to one of its executives.

That earned her a two-minute phone conversation, but she kept pushing and finally got an in-person meeting with the head of programming.

“I pushed,” said von Pollaro. “They said that flowers weren’t a broad enough audience. I said no, a lot of people are interested.”

I guess we will find out.

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