

The Accidental Entrepreneurs

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When psychologist Ken Ralph suspected his tenure with Lancaster County Office of Mental Health might be coming to an end in 1989 because of dwindling federal funding, he did what many workers do in this era of downsizing.

He started his own business -- a simple private counseling practice in his home.

"Initially it was a little scary because I was leaving a guaranteed income and not so sure about private practice," said Ralph, 56, of Lancaster. "I knew if I couldn't make a success of it, though, that I could get a job again."

Today, Ralph has expanded his firm and offers seminars for psychologists that have proven so popular, he now counsels clients only on the side.

Ralph's business started out as a sole proprietorship centered on the clinical practice. Soon, he and his wife, Judi, also 56, considered offering continuing-education seminars for psychologists on the side.

Running seminars had been an integral part of Ralph's job with the county, and he had a keen understanding of how to do it well. And Judi was "a whiz with details," he said.

J&K Seminars became official on Jan. 2, 1991. The couple scheduled the first seminar that fall.

Over the years, the business grew exponentially and now includes their son, Jason, 31. On March 2, 2001, Ralph restructured the legal entity to form a domestic limited liability company with Judi and Ken each holding 48 percent ownership of the business and Jason 4 percent.

Today the family offers seven two-day seminars each year at Lancaster Host Resort with some of the top researchers and mental health practitioners in the world.

They market books written by their presenters and offer home study programs with continuing education credits.

Ralph credits his success with starting small, filling a niche, having a passion for his work and wanting to do something better than anyone else.

"I know exactly what psychologists want, too, because I am one of them," he said.

When Ralph worked for the county as director of consultation and education, he had a great job, he said. He was charged with developing strategies to enhance mental health and prevent mental illness.

"One of the ways I thought to do this was to train professionals in the latest techniques," he said.

As funding for prevention diminished in the county, however, the seminars were phased out, opening the door for Ralph to fill the void as an independent contractor.

The timing was perfect because Pennsylvania and many other states began requiring continuing-education classes for licensed professionals. Suddenly, seminars became more important than ever -- not just for psychologists, but for psychiatric nurses, addiction counselors and other professionals.

"We attract between 250 to 550 mental health professionals to each of our two-day programs," Ralph said. Last year, 2,600 professionals attended the company's seven seminars.

Nonprofessionals such as parents and relatives of individuals affected with various mental health problems also attend.

All programs and seminars are approved for accreditation purposes ---even for Act 48 requirements for teachers and other school personnel in Pennsylvania.

While J&K Seminars has no employees and no wages to pay, the business requires a considerable investment up front to prepare for each seminar.

"We take \$10,000 to \$15,000 out of pocket for each meeting," Ralph said. This investment, for example, covers printing and postage for up to 65,000 brochures to advertise each event.

"The hardest seminar to do is the first one," Ralph said. "You build on that. It's like a computer program. After the basic part has been tested, then you add to it."

J&K Seminars has been adding ever since.

First the company added more seminars each year. Then came book sales, then audiotaping of seminars. Finally, J&K added home study courses.

Ralph would not have gone in this direction were it not for his son, who works as a research assistant to a neuropsychologist at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Jason is interested in the Internet and oversees the fulfillment of their home study mail order business.

According to Ralph, Jason and his wife, Lauren, developed the Web site.

"We sold 500 home-study packages last year and expect sales of about 1,200 this year," he said.

Ralph appreciates the opportunity to pass on important research to his professional colleagues because things are different now than they were 30 years ago.

There is so much new information on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar illness and psychopharmacology, in particular.

"Clinicians are getting better with different kinds of treatments, so it is very exciting," he said. "It makes it seem like the dark ages when I graduated (from college)."

"In part, however, it is frustrating to know how little of this information gets out into the community of providers -- especially into the schools, where you have teachers who don't believe there is such a thing as ADHD."

Ralph said some teachers think ADHD students are just lazy when, in fact, considerable research has demonstrated a clear genetic difference in the brains of these individuals.

While having a family business may seem ideal to some couples, others may be aghast at the thought of spending every waking hour with one's spouse.

Ralph said he and Judi could be together all the time, however, because they know how to communicate, especially when there is a conflict.

"It's a good thing I'm a psychologist," he said, laughing, adding that many couples don't know how to talk on an equal level. "With many couples, one is up and one is down -- which messes up intimacy.

"I have many strengths and interests, and Judi has her strengths and interests, so it works well for us. We are really lucky."

Judi, a lab technician by profession, agreed.

"I enjoy working with my husband because he is really easy to get along with. We have lots of laughs and lots of fun. I think we are closer as a couple because we spend so much time together."

The downside of so much togetherness, Judi fears, is that if anything were to happen to change their situation, the loneliness would be amplified.

Ralph delights in he and Judi being free to make their own decisions. They have an advisory board with representatives from various professions that meets twice a year, "but ultimately every decision is Judi's and mine."

Another perk is knowing world renown speakers on a personal level. Talking with them and hearing presentations on the cutting edge of science is making Ralph a better psychologist, too, he said, and his clients are reaping the benefits.

For Judi and Ken, perhaps the biggest challenge has been setting boundaries in this all-consuming business.

"We work all the time -- evenings, weekends, holidays," he said. "Not answering the business phone during dinner is a struggle."

While he sometimes works 80 hours a week, Ralph relishes the freedom to take a mid-afternoon power nap -- whenever he wishes -- followed by a cup of coffee. For Judi, the flexibility translates into a quick run to the gym each morning, which she loves.

Ralph never used to think of himself as an entrepreneur, but he now likes the notion.

"There are so many creative ways of making money as an entrepreneur," he said.

"We just try to do the best we can and offer a very good service at a reasonable price. I think that's why we have such a loyal customer base."