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EMMA THOMPSON

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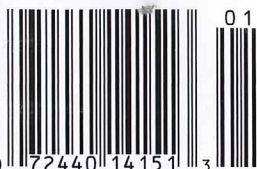
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They created natural ways to heal burnout

Stressed. Sad. The solution? These women found joy (and money) by making their own organic beauty creams

BY LIZ LOGAN



SHARON HACKNEY-ROBINSON »

BEFORE: Neonatal intensive care nurse

NOW: Owner of an organic-skin-care company

It's mid-June 2012, and hundreds of beauty companies have descended on the Javits Center in New York to woo buyers from bigwig retailers like Bloomingdale's. The trade event, HBA Global Expo, is the industry's largest, and for Sharon Hackney-Robinson, just being here is a major achievement. From a booth adorned with birds of paradise, hydrangeas and flowering ginger, Hackney-Robinson, then 52, founder of the organic-skin-care company Me & the Girls, hands out gift bags filled with mini samples of her six products. "Where does your passion come from?" a buyer asks. "I'm a critical-care nurse," Hackney-Robinson replies in her gentle, girlish voice, "so I know the importance of safe products." The three-day event marks the official launch of her company: Yahoo News stops by to interview her, she receives her first major order (from the e-commerce site Truth in Aging), and her Moon night moisturizer and Limonum body scrub win awards. "I guess we were the darling of the show!" she says.

Seven years earlier, Hackney-Robinson could not have imagined this glamorous scene—or this exhilaration. In 2005 she hit the lowest point in her life. She worked long



>> "My biggest obstacle was being a beauty industry newbie," says Hackney-Robinson, shown here in the Philadelphia neighborhood where she was raised.



KARI GRAN AND LISA STRAIN

BEFORE: Managing real estate brokers

NOW: Owners of a company that makes natural beauty products

Noon on a Sunday in early September 2013. Lisa Strain, 55, gazes out over a lush greenbelt near Seattle's Lake Union for a brief moment before continuing to handwrite expiration dates on small, black bottles and pack them in simple jute bags. The sun streams in through a 12-foot window and reflects off the white brick walls of the rehabbed 1920s distillery. Behind a heavy door, her business partner, Kari Gran, 45, is in the industrial laboratory making a batch of her natural moisturizing serum, which she sells online and in a loft showroom four floors up. Gran adds a few drops of rose oil (precious at \$500 for 30 milliliters) to a mixture of camellia, lavender and sunflower oils. "True oil of rose is so amazing, so beautiful," says Gran. "There's nothing like it."

» **Three years ago**, Gran and Strain had much less serene professional lives: They were hustling to sell real estate during a recession, often working 50 hours a week.

Only when tragedy struck did the two friends realize they needed to slow down. In 2008 health troubles in Gran's family left her and her husband caring for their nephew, then nine years old. Around the same time, Strain's father was killed on his way home from church by a drunk driver. Not long after, Strain's adult daughter fell into a prolonged, life-threatening crisis. The two friends began pulling away from the demands of the real estate business and looking for something that would bring pleasure into their lives.

Gran, who suffers from an autoimmune disease affecting her thyroid, began reading about the ingredients in her beauty products. After years of making her own lip balms, she decided to mix her own skin-care creams. In 2010 she gave Strain a Christmas gift

of her creations: a lip balm, a hydrating tonic (called Everything's Coming Up Roses) and a moisturizing serum made purely of oils (Beauty Rest). Strain loved the smell and feel of the oils on her skin. "The serum was herbal and earthy in a sophisticated way," she says. "It was complex."

One morning after a 6 o'clock yoga class, Strain said to Gran, "Let's make this into a business." All the color drained out of Gran's face as she realized, for the first time, that she could have a career doing what she loved. Within days, the two had hatched a plan to get the business off the ground. Gran, who has a bachelor of science degree, would develop formulations and run the lab. Strain, who had an advertising background, would lead the PR and marketing efforts. To make it all happen, the pair lent themselves \$200,000 from their savings.

Gran took classes with a natural-ingredients formulator in California, studied the industry textbook *Milady's Standard Fundamentals for Estheticians* and signed up for a weeklong course at Bastyr University near Seattle, a school that specializes in science-based, natural medicine. Their first product samples went out to friends and family at the end of 2011.

Today the company, Kari Gran skin care, is on track to gross more than \$500,000 in 2014. Gran writes a blog (karigran.com/blog) dedicated to educating people about beauty products. The business is still in the start-up phase; the co-owners barely pay themselves the minimum wage. ("Our husbands are totally OK with it. Us, not so much," Strain says.) But "there's a solid profit to be made," Gran says. "The margins are very good, even though natural products usually involve more expensive ingredients. For a long time, using anti-aging products, I bought into the belief that I needed to be fixed. We're encouraging women to think about beauty a little bit differently." *

LIZ LOGAN is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn, New York.

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