



ALUMNI PROFILES — Spring 2009

## Bringing Families Closer Through Conversation

"Take my marketing degree, add a little occupational therapy, throw in a bit of mom, mix it all up, and you have Around the Table® Games," says Beth Daniels, M.S.O.T. '96, of her family game company. To date, she has created three games—Family Talk™, Family Talk2™, and Grandparent Talk™—designed to bring families closer through conversation.

The idea for Around the Table® Games came to Daniels when she was a stay-at-home mom with two busy children, Kate and Nathan. "My friends, some who worked [outside the home] and some who did not, all experienced the same thing," she says. "We raced between Girl Scouts and gymnastics and soccer and church events. We were not having those dinner table conversations with the family that we had growing up."

In response, Daniels created Family Talk™, a game with 100 cards containing questions family members could ask each other while running errands, waiting for a restaurant table, or on the sidelines at a soccer game. Sample questions include "What was dinner time like when you were growing up?" and "What worries you the most?"

She then developed a second game, Grandparent Talk™. Years earlier when her great-grandmother turned 87, family members wrote down a list of questions to ask her. Daniels, her mother, and her grandfather videotaped the interview. Half of the questions for Grandparent Talk™ came from that videotape, she says.

Daniels' educational and professional background prepared her for the development of these games. After graduating from college with a marketing degree, she held a business position at a nursing home but wanted to help patients directly. So, she began to shadow a friend at her occupational therapy job. Daniels then decided to apply to Washington University's graduate occupational therapy program at the School of Medicine.

After graduation, Daniels worked at the University, teaching and supervising students' fieldwork. She also worked with Ken Harrington, director of the University's Skandalaris Center for Entrepreneurial Studies, to incorporate entrepreneurship into one of her classes.

Once she created Family Talk™ and Grandparent Talk™, she decided to contact Harrington for advice about turning her game ideas into a business. He suggested that she participate in Ideabounce®, a Skandalaris program that encourages entrepreneurship. Aspiring entrepreneurs post their business



Beth Daniels' family conversation games can be found in several stores, including Imagination Toys in Ladue, Missouri. (Photo: David Kilper)

ideas on the Web site, Daniels explains. Periodically throughout the year, Ideabounce® selects “bouncers” to pitch their ideas to judges and entrepreneurs from the community.

To Daniels’ surprise, the judges selected her idea as a winner. At a dinner honoring the winners, she met Pete Peters of Innovate Venture Mentoring Service. She applied to his program, which provided her with amazing mentors, Daniels says, who are giving her advice and “connecting me with people who can advance me in my endeavors.”

Customer feedback also helps. In her initial design, Daniels placed questions in a jar. When customers told her they brought the jar with them on vacations and elsewhere, she modified the design, putting the cards on a clip for greater portability.

Today, Daniels uses an outside sales force to facilitate sales and a public relations firm to increase national awareness. Originally a local business, Around the Table® Games can be found “in over 150 retail locations in over 30 states, and in Canada. We are hoping to keep that momentum, if not increase it.”

The job is a natural fit for Daniels. Her goal “is to keep conversations going, especially intergenerational conversations.”

Beth’s daughter, Kate, also is helping to keep conversations going. Kate created two new games, Buddy Talk and Camp Talk, scheduled to launch in spring 2009. These new games aim to connect kids through conversation.

“Engaging people in purposeful conversations, no matter what the age, makes life more meaningful,” Daniels says. She notes that she has learned a lot from her kids by playing these games. “Just when you think you know what your kids are going to say, they surprise you. It is important to keep talking in order to keep up with their thoughts.”