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Making It

A nonprofit worker knits together a profitable new business

By *Vanessa M. Gezari*

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Danielle Romanetti knits constantly: in doctor's waiting rooms, while watching Pittsburgh Steelers games, even -- novice knitters, please don't try this! -- in bumper-to-bumper traffic. She has been doing it so long, she says, that she doesn't have to look at her hands as the yarn slips over her needles. "You can get an awful lot of a sock knitted while sitting at a red light in rush hour," says Danielle, 28, of Alexandria.

In 2006, Danielle turned her passion into a company, Knit-a-Gogo, which capitalizes on the surge of knitting fever among the young and hip by offering knitting classes in Washington area cafes. By reaching outside traditional venues, Danielle has captured a key demographic: busy professional women and stay-at-home moms seeking something calming to do with their hands.

"They say, 'Rather than typing on my BlackBerry, I could do this,'" Danielle says. "They're knitting because they can't relax, and they want to relax."

Born in State College, Pa., Danielle also used knitting as therapy, the motion of her hands soothing chronic anxiety that runs in her family. She grew up on a farm in central Pennsylvania and moved often after her parents divorced. Danielle's maternal grandmother taught her to knit as a child, but Danielle lived with her father and rarely saw her mother growing up and, as a result, lost touch with her grandmother. While Danielle was in college, a relative's terminal illness reconnected her with her mother and extended family. One holiday season, Danielle asked her grandmother to teach her to knit -- again. "I became obsessed," Danielle says.

After graduate school, she moved to Washington to work for nonprofit groups and began frequenting the yarn store Stitch DC, later working and teaching there. When she began teaching in coffee shops -- and leaving promotional postcards by the registers -- business exploded, she says. Knit-a-Gogo now offers about 10 classes a week at cafes in Washington, Arlington and Alexandria, and at Knit Happens, an Alexandria yarn store. Danielle also hosts workshops and organizes knitting parties where guests produce squares that can be stitched together for a gift blanket.



IN STITCHES: Danielle Romanetti hosts knitting workshops and parties. (Keith Barraclough)

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After \$4,000 in startup costs, Knit-a-Gogo's sales last year totaled almost \$17,000, with about \$5,700 net, Danielle says. She expects sales to rise to \$38,000 this year, with a net of about \$10,200. Her biggest expenses have been Web-site redesign to support online class registration, advertising and payment for her six contract teachers. She also paid herself about \$4,000 in wages this year. She left her full-time position in nonprofit fundraising in July to devote more time to the business. (Her boyfriend, an examiner with the U.S. Patent and

Trademark Office, splits living expenses.) She still works part time as a nonprofit consultant but hopes to expand Knit-a-Gogo to Maryland and get her own teaching venue.

Nicole Titus of Arlington started taking classes with Danielle two years ago and said the sense of community has kept her coming back. "There's lots of young working

professional women in the city, and we're all kind of neurotic in this way," Titus says. "She's got the right mix of patience and humor to deal with it."

When Danielle started teaching, she sometimes longed to go home and knit alone rather than facing her students; but she found that teaching relaxed and rewarded her. "I feel more at home now," Danielle says, "as if I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing."

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