



THE Working CHRONICLES



PERSONAL STORIES OF AMERICA AT WORK

How One Immigrant Launched a Successful Business from Her Dorm

Russian émigré Aleksandra Efimova launches two ballet businesses from one humble beginning

Lucky growing up with 420 square feet

I'm an accidental business owner, surprised by my career path because it's not what I thought life had in store for me. Growing up in the Soviet Union, I lived a very average life. I was born in 1977 and at that time, the Soviet Union was promoting equality—everyone lived in very similar conditions. The leaders of the Communist Party were living a more privileged life, which the majority of people didn't even know about. Our apartment was 420 square feet and had three rooms, including the living room—way more than most of the other neighbors. Five of us lived in our tiny apartment: my mom, dad, grandparents, and me. We felt very, very lucky.



"They believed in me, so I started showing ballet shoes and selling them to local dance schools."

I went to the Hermitage Art School in St. Petersburg, part of the Hermitage Art Museum, which is the Louvre of Russia. Every year, only fifteen children get selected to be a part of the program. I had a very basic education in dance and classical form of dance and ballroom. I also played piano as a child, but it was the arts and the fine painting that I thought was my future. It was my dream to become an artist. However, I came to the United States when my mom remarried an American, and I ended up in a public school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I finished high school. I learned to speak English and adapt to a new country and culture very quickly. In retrospect, who knows what would have happened after the fall of the Soviet Union, if the government would still be giving jobs to artists?

Starting a business by accident out of my college dorm room

I started my company, Russian Pointe, out of my dorm room at Eastern Michigan University in 1998 as a project for a business class during my junior year in college. I approached the company that was trying to bring Russian ballet pointe shoes to the U.S. I was introduced to the cobblers in Moscow who were making shoes for the Bolshoi Ballet. They had made several unsuccessful attempts to bring their ballet shoes to the United States. I was only twenty years old, but I contacted them and said, "I don't have the capital or any experience running a business, but I promise I will work as hard as I can and will put my full effort into making this a success. I will never lie to you or cheat or act unethically or unfair." They believed in me, so I started showing ballet shoes and selling them to local dance schools and stores out of my college dorm room.

Now, I have two businesses. The first started seventeen years ago where we design, manufacture, and distribute wholesale internationally and all over the United States a very elegant professional line of dance shoes made in a Moscow factory. The second business is the upscale dance boutique that I started almost four years ago. I am very proud and excited that both are successful and growing especially in this economy. I love presenting a concept for dance and putting something out in the market that has not been done before.

An independent business owner on the Magnificent Mile

I moved my wholesale business to Chicago in 2006 and was also attending Harvard Business School's Executive Program at the time. I thoroughly enjoyed the city and lived downtown near beautiful Magnificent Mile on Michigan Avenue. I think it's one of the most beautiful streets in the world. I noticed that there was no dance store on the main street in downtown Chicago and saw that as a great opportunity. So, I opened a dance boutique and started to sell not only our brand, but also products for dancers from other manufacturers around the world. Most of the stores on the Magnificent Mile are corporate owned, like Tiffany and Louis Vuitton. I am one of the only independent owners.

I was honored when Mayor Daley appointed me to be the co-chair of the Moscow Committee to the city of Chicago. We host delegations from Russia who come to study language and culture, and have sent children from Chicago public schools to Russia to study the language. Community work and philanthropy is very meaningful for me. In the evenings, when the boutique is closed, we host many receptions and events bringing artists together for the Russian-speaking community. It is almost like a Russian Mecca, a home to a vibrant international community where we create an amazing atmosphere where people are exposed to the arts and have a chance to socialize and talk face to face with people that they usually only see on stage.

Both of my businesses started by accident. It is not like you just get lucky and the right things come your way—I've had to work hard, make choices, and give some things up, such as my own personal dance career or having a family. However, I feel privileged and lucky to identify what I love to do and what makes me happy. For me, it is the arts, education, international relations, Russian products, and Russian culture. I can now see how my past in Russia and in the arts gave me the foundation to start these unique businesses. I may not be the artist that I envisioned as a girl, but I have found a fulfilling role and passion in supporting the arts both in Russia and the United States.



Katie Gay | March 22, 2011