

4-1-2013

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Scholar Commons Citation

Jones, Kelly, "NNB News : 2013 : 04 : 01 : For One USFSP Student, Personal Tragedy Leads To A Business Idea" (2013). *NNB News*. 28.

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April 1, 2013 [St. Petersburg](#) [No comments](#)

FOR ONE USFSP STUDENT, PERSONAL TRAGEDY LEADS TO A BUSINESS IDEA



The smell of strawberries and poppy filled the kitchen of her house. On the counter lay cellophane and pink ribbons that would soon be used to package her finished products.

Francesca Genovese, 25, of St. Petersburg, is the owner of an online boutique, The Sleepy Poppy Shop. The boutique specializes in finely handcrafted exfoliating soaps and bath products. Using only organic botanicals and essential oils, products come in a variety of alcohol-free

"whimsical" scents and soaps freshly poured to order. The boutique's signature Poppy Seed Exfoliate buffs, brightens and removes dead, dull skin, and is the basis of the product line. The Sleepy Poppy Shop also offers Shea butter soaps that are vegan friendly, made from soy or vegetable based glycerin or coconut oil.

Genovese launched The Sleepy Poppy Shop in 2011 after announcing to friends and family her idea to start a business selling homemade natural bath and body products.

"I told them that I had a plan, a theme and a load of creativity waiting to be put to some use," Genovese said. "Then I shut my eyes tight and waited for their reactions. I was fortunate they were supportive and excited ... my best friend even jumped in and volunteered to do all of my product photography free of charge."

Genovese's business idea and plan began long before The Sleepy Poppy Shop actually became a reality. After receiving her bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of South Florida in 2009, Genovese thought she had her mind set on a career path. She would either get her Ph.D. in English to teach at the college level or attend law school. Deciding on law school and feeling confident and ready to take the LSAT exam, Genovese's prospects darkened after finding out her father had been diagnosed with cancer. Having just graduated, with no job, no children and being unmarried, she had no "true personal responsibility at the time," she said. With her older siblings and mother working to support their families, Genovese moved home to Vero Beach to help take care of her father.

After dozens of doctor's appointments and radiation treatments, Genovese's father's health was much better. Approaching his 75th birthday, her family decided to have a huge party to celebrate.

"Our whole, big, Italian family came down to congratulate him," she said. "When the weeklong event was over I planned to leave and move back to Tampa Bay ... he no longer needed me to drive him around town and his prognosis was positive."

Genovese returned to St. Petersburg in August 2010 to be with her fiancé. Excited to jumpstart her career she began submitting resumes and looking into taking the LSAT exam in Pinellas County. Two months later her excitement came to a halt when her mother called saying her father was in the hospital and he may not make it through the night. After several strokes, a major sepsis infection and cardiac arrest, her father had made it through but his care fell into her hands once again.

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"I had the help of my younger sister ... but the level of his needs was something I never thought I would survive," Genovese said. "We fed him, dressed him, took him to the bathroom and did all that goes along with elder care. I helped for months until I started feeling like my life was never going to be able to start."

Five months later her mother hired a nurse to care for her father and Genovese headed back to St. Petersburg in hopes of restarting her life. Faced with the reality of the current economy, unemployment, a lack of interviews and the challenges with her father, Genovese was unsure of what to do with her life.

"The one thing I still felt confident in was my creativity. I could still write stories, I could still draw and paint and make crafts," Genovese said. "One day when I was feeling particularly down ... something clicked ... turn the little hobbies that made me happy into something bigger."

She had the idea to make her own exfoliating soaps and bath products using the seed from her favorite flower, the poppy, as the exfoliate. Her theme symbolizes and references some of her favorite literature. The Sleepy Poppy Shop's Land of Oz Line is based upon flowers' influence in the classic tale of Dorothy and her friends, as they adventure through the poppy field to the Land of Oz. The relaxing and soothing scent puts them fast asleep until the good witch appears to lift them from the poppy's powerful spell.

"Lord, please let someone buy my stuff today," is the first thought that pops in Genovese's head every day since starting her small business. Every day she works on her business in some way. Making new products, designing labels, crunching numbers and filling orders.

"It's still new," Genovese said. "It may succeed, it may fail, but I will never regret trying to run my own independent, creative business because it pulled me out of a rut I could have easily gotten stuck in."

By Kelly Jones

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