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Katy Miller, founder of Lillie & Pine.

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AI quickly changing the landscape for entry-level jobs



MARK GRYWACHESKI

Economy

Mark Grywacheski is an expert in financial markets and economic analysis and is an investment adviser with Quad-Cities Investment Group, Davenport.

Throughout history, college graduates have shared some familiar traits. With their diploma proudly in hand, they're enthusiastic to start their professional career. They're eager to prove their worth, willing to do much of the grunt work more experienced employees would simply rather avoid.

As a result, entry-level jobs provide employers with a steady pipeline of new talent with minimal risk or cost. College graduates are typically willing to work longer hours for relatively little pay. The basic, often repetitive work they perform also serves as valuable on-the-job training and experience. But in the fast-changing world of AI, recent college graduates are having greater difficulty in finding those entry-level positions.

AI continues to take over an increasing share of tasks that have historically been the entry point and training ground for new college graduates. According to the

Burning Glass Institute, roughly 18 million U.S. workers – about 12% of the U.S. workforce – are currently in occupations where AI could considerably reduce entry-level opportunities. BGI contends that AI has already displaced many workers and that it increasingly narrows the career entry point for college graduates.

According to LinkedIn, entry-level job postings are down 23% compared to March 2020. Handshake, an employment website that focuses on the younger Gen Z population, notes that job postings for entry-level jobs have declined 15% over the past year. Likewise, the number of applications received per entry-level job has risen by 30%.

Today's college graduates face unemployment rates that are rising faster than any other education or age demographic. According to data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, for U.S. workers aged 22-27, the unemployment gap

between college degree holders and non-college degree holders is the lowest in 30 years. In June, the unemployment rate for 22-27-year-olds with college degrees was 4.8%. For similar aged non-degree holders, the unemployment rate was 7.4%. This equates to an unemployment gap of just 2.6%.

By comparison, in June 2010, the gap was 9.1%. For the 22-27 age group, the unemployment rate for college degree holders was 7.1% while that of non-degree holders was 16.2%.

BGI's research indicates more than half (52%) of new college graduates work at a job that doesn't need a college degree. By 2034, BGI projects this surplus of college graduates will increase to 7-11 million young adults.

AI is not expected to completely eliminate the realm of entry-level positions. However, BGI contends that AI will further erode the number of entry-level jobs that companies will need. For those entry-level positions they do retain, employers will focus less on educational credentials and more on hiring workers who can adapt and engage with critical thinking. With an increasing workload being performed by AI, employers will likely emphasize those entry-level workers who can thrive in cross-training across multiple operations within their business.

More than half of new college graduates work at a job that doesn't need a college degree.



Source: Burning Glass Institute

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What *Silicon Valley* Taught Me About Business

ANDREA BELK OLSON

In 2014, *Silicon Valley* premiered on HBO. It was a sharp comedy that brought forward the quirks and culture oddities of the tech world. Now 10 years later, it seems more like a guide to understand how business works — or how it doesn't. Behind the business challenges Pied Piper faces and the painfully familiar jargon is a candid take on what makes organizations succeed or fail. The surprise is that it wasn't the tech, it was the people.

Silicon Valley isn't a show about building apps or pitching to venture capitalists. It is about the messiness and complexity of leadership. It is about ego, innovation and fear. It is about a company's ambition getting mired in trial-and-error and overarching incompetence. Even being 10 years old, these dynamics haven't changed. If anything, they've only gotten even more relevant.

Take Richard Hendricks, the founder of Pied Piper. He is a brilliant coder with a brilliant vision. This character represents a very real type of corporate executive — someone who has great ideas that speak for themselves. But ideas are just the starting point. Great execution is essential, and that doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's impacted by internal personalities and external politics. Richard underestimated this continually, and, every time, the business paid for it.

This is a pattern visible in both startups and large enterprises. Say a team designs a promising technology concept. The market is eager for it. But during development, progress stalls because there's poor

communication. Or no one knows who's in charge. Or internal conflicts get swept under the rug until they boil over. These aren't technical issues, but cultural ones. And they're the same dynamics *Silicon Valley* portrayed so well.

The show also highlights the constant obsession with disruption. Every character in the show chased the next shiny object. They talked about making the world a better place while completely losing sight of what made the company successful and what their customers needed. Many companies fall into this trap. They begin with a clear purpose but drift into various rabbit holes. They talk about mission, vision and values, but forget to connect it with day-to-day execution.

Pied Piper's team kept changing focus. First, they were about file compression. Then they were a video streaming platform. Then they had an AI play and a new internet. Every opportunity seemed promising, but they took the team further from their core. The same thing happens when businesses start chasing ideas rather than focusing on their customers' needs.

What *Silicon Valley* revealed was that companies often fail not from lack of talent, vision, or passion — they fail from a lack of alignment. The smartest people in the room can still lose sight of what

they originally set out to do. They can unintentionally work against each other. And when no one calls it out, you get dysfunction and a beautifully designed product that doesn't solve a customer problem.

One of the most accurate parts of the show was its portrayal of startup culture. Ping-Pong tables, pizza parties, massive product launches and mission statements full of feel-good jargon. All this while their real business issues went unaddressed. And it's a problem businesses still repeat, focusing on perks and pedigrees instead of purpose and differentiation.

Gavin Belson, the cocky CEO villain of Pied Piper's nemesis, the tech giant Hooli, surrounded himself with yes-men. Hyper focused on retaining monopolistic control, he often confused affirmation with insight. He also burned through money and talent trying to prove he was the smartest person in the room. Leaders like this still exist in many companies, often to that organization's detriment.

So why is *Silicon Valley* still relevant? Because the challenges of business haven't really changed. We still confuse busy with productive. We still promote technical experts into leadership without training them to lead. We still think data will give us all the answers. But business is human,

"What *Silicon Valley* revealed was that companies often fail not from lack of talent, vision, or passion — they fail from a lack of alignment." - Andrea Belk Olson

emotional, and messy. No amount of technology or strategy decks will make that change.

The companies that recognize this are the ones that will succeed. They will invest in organizational alignment and prioritize clear communication. They will build cultures where people can challenge others without fear. And they will not lose focus on the core problem they're trying to solve.

While the show is exaggerated for laughs, it never lost sight of the truth.

Behind every business is people. And people have egos, blind spots, and the capacity to do something great or blow it all up. This show reminded us success isn't about building the best product. It's about building the right team and creating the right conditions for them to thrive.

So, if you're running a company, leading a team, or dreaming up your next big idea, watch the show again. Laugh, cringe, but take notes. Because everything it got right is still happening today.



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Boetje's keeps a condiment tradition going

GRETCHEN TESKE

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At any Midwest barbecue there's bound to be a few staples: brats, hamburgers and, for those in the know, Boetje's mustard.

The European-style stoneground mustard is a staple in the Quad-Cities and most of northern Illinois. The company, pronounced boat-chee, has been around since 1889 and is now owned by Will Kropp, who has spent decades making sure the mustard company continues its legacy.

It started with Fred Boetje, who immigrated from Germany. He quickly decided American food was too bland, and decided to solve the problem for himself.

"So what he did, was he developed the recipe that we currently use today that has water, sugar, salt, distilled vinegar and mustard seed," Kropp said. "And that has never changed since day one."

Owner and President Will Kropp poses for a photo at his desk at Boetje's Foods, Inc. on Monday, July 14, in Rock Island. Kropp took the business over from his father, Robert, and will eventually turn it over to his son, Harrison, who has officially been working with him for 18 years. His wife and daughter also help run the business.

Katelyn Metzger



The four stages of mustard can be seen: starting as a plant, seed that has been harvested and cleaned, seed that has been ground, and seed that has been mixed with water, distilled vinegar, sugar and salt. *Katelyn Metzger*

Using an Old World recipe, Boetje developed his Dutch mustard out of his home in Rock Island, about 10 blocks from where the company's headquarters are today at 2736 12th Street. Once Boetje felt he had the recipe right, he filled up a wooden bucket with the mustard, grabbed a ladle and started walking door to door.

"If you had an empty jar, he'd fill it up for a nickel," Kropp said. "And nickel

by nickel is how we got the company started."

The company stayed with the Boetje family for more than half a century, until they sold their interests in 1960. By December of 1983, the Kropp family took over and have been running it ever since.

Robert Kropp, Will's father, had just retired from his job at a coal company in Galesburg, Illinois, when he learned Boetje's was for sale. Robert was living

in Davenport at the time and figured it would be a good endeavor to get into with his son, but there was one problem.

Will was a little far away.

"At the time, I was working down in south Florida as an assistant golf pro at the PGA National," Kropp said. "I did that for four years, and my offer came up to continue on with golf, or to come back and be my own boss. And being my own boss is kind of nice."

He moved from Florida back to the Quad-Cities in the dead of winter. His car froze and he didn't have warm clothes, but he had an opportunity and his dad by his side. Together, they got to work immediately.

"When I started, he wanted me to learn how to make the mustard, how to do the repair work, and be self sufficient," Kropp said. "We weren't calling on people or having to spend outside money when we could do it ourselves. I enjoyed it, because I really I missed having him around."



The original Boetje's Dutch mustard recipe from 1889 is still used today using an Old World process to grind the mustard seed.

Katelyn Metzger

His father retired from the business about 10 years ago, but a third generation of Kropps is already in the building. Will Kropp's son, Harrison helps him make the mustard while his daughter, Whitney, works the online side of the business and his wife Jane does the paperwork.

Production starts on Fridays with 1,000 pounds of seed put into a special stone grinder that helps release the oils for more flavor. Bucket by bucket, the mashed seed is put into a giant oak vat that's been with the company since the early 1920s.

"That contains water, vinegar, sugar, salt and then, of course, the ground-up seed," he said.

The mixture stays in the vats for 48 hours to age. Once the weekend wraps up, the Kropps get to work on the stone grinding process which takes up the entire day.

By Tuesday the two-man team is filling 9,000 bottles of mustard to be shipped out. Wednesdays are for cleaning and disinfecting and Thursdays are for sales.

After a few decades in the business, Kropp decided to get creative with his marketing strategies and in 2008 decided to see what the rest of the world thought of his product.

Kropp sent it to the Napa Valley World-Wide Mustard Competition, hoping at the very least he'd get a few orders from West Coast judges who tried the product.

"I sent a case out with all the entry work, and didn't hear anything back for over a month. And then I got a phone call. 'Mr. Kropp, you guys won. Here's the grand champion. You're the gold medal winners,'" he recalled.

It turns out Kropp's product gave a quick 'pardon me' to Grey Poupon and slid into first place that year, though the renown Dijon mustard brand was able to mount comeback and win the gold medal the following year.



(Above) Boetje's owner Will Kropp shows off a 1,000-pound vat of mustard seeds on Monday, July 14, in Rock Island. The entire vat will be ground up all at once to produce about 9,000 bottles. (Right) Boetje's uses mustard seeds that are grown and imported from Alberta, Canada.

Katelyn Metzger



"I sent a case out with all the entry work, and didn't hear anything back for over a month. And then I got a phone call. 'Mr. Kropp, you guys won. Here's the grand champion. You're the gold medal winners.'" – Will Kropp



That gold medal was sent to Rock Island and was the first of many to decorate the walls inside the building that's been home to the company for decades. Boetje's has continued its success in the mustard championships, walking out with more gold medals in 2023 and 2024 and a pair of silvers in 2025.

Boetje's sells a variety of mustards, including its traditional stone ground, honey mustard, bourbon barrel aged, rum barrel aged, maple mustard and a cocktail sauce they named Sea Sauce. The products are available locally at Fareway and Hy-Vee or for sale online.

Variety packs, multi packs and even Boetje's merchandise are all for sale on the website. The specialty mustards, like the barrel aged or honey mustard, tend to fly off the shelves quickly. Kropp said he's at the mercy of supplies coming in on time, which means they may not be available at the same time, every time. But, they always get made.

"We're fortunate people are pretty nice about it. They understand you're going to get your order. It might be an extra week, but it's coming," he said. "As long as you can communicate to them, they know to keep up the support."

Local restaurants keep Boetje's available for customers, and he's even used his golf connections to have his product available at the John Deere Classic, a local stop on the PGA Tour each summer. Kropp said he completely sold out of the supply he took to the tournament in July and has already agreed to bring a new batch in next year.



(Top Left) Will Kropp of Boetje's Foods, Inc., shows the first stage of grinding the mustard seed on Monday, July 14, in Rock Island. (Middle) Owner Will Kropp shows where the mustard seeds are ground a second time with a pumice stone at Boetje's Foods, Inc. on Monday, July 14, in Rock Island. (Bottom) Will Kropp shows off a gold medal that was won at Napa Valley Mustard Festival in 2008, the first year he decided to enter the famous Boetje's mustard into a contest. That year, he beat out Grey Poupon, which placed second.

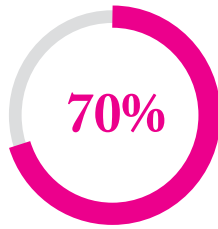
Katelyn Metzger

Mustard facts



Boetje's gets its mustard seeds from **Alberta, Canada.**

Despite the tiny seeds, mustard plants can grow up to **3' three feet tall.**



Seventy percent of the world's supply of mustard seed comes from Canada but Nepal and Russia are also renowned growers.

Mustard has to be made in **oak vats** because the acidity of the vinegar will eat through steel.

Boetje's has been using the **same recipe since 1889.**



An oak barrel from the 1920s is used to mix the ground mustard seeds, water, distilled vinegar, salt and sugar at Boetje's Foods, Inc.

Katelyn Metzger



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(Above Left) Labels for Boetje's Honey Mustard are used during the bottling process. Local honey from Crandall Farms in Coal Valley is used to make the sweet mustard. (Above Right) Vintage Boetje's jars are on display in the front office in Rock Island.

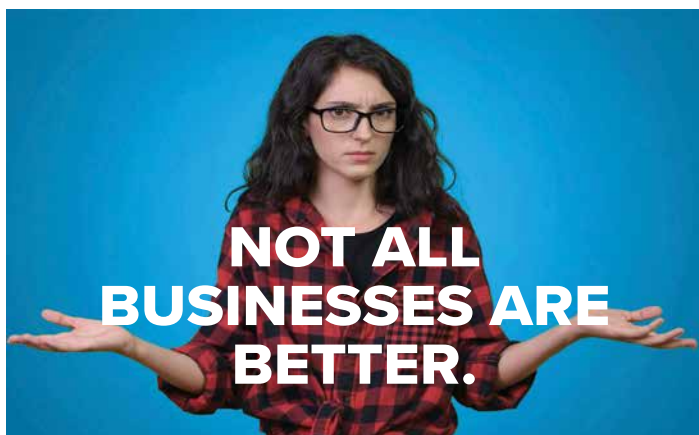
Katelyn Metzger

It's a good feeling, Kropp said, knowing the family business he took over 40 years ago is still sustaining his family to this day.

"I didn't think it would do that," he said. "But you know, as I continue working here, I learn more and I feel pretty confident about what's going on. We'll keep it going."

Afterall, a very important person to the industry is close by. Across the street from Boetje's is Chippiannock Cemetery where the original founder, Frederick Boetje, is buried.

"He's watching over the business. Making sure I'm doing it right," Kropp said with a smile.



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Lillie & Pine makes self-care smell good

GRETCHEN TESKE

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Katy Miller never meant to start a skincare company. It just happened.

As the founder of Lillie & Pine, a company specializing in all things skincare, she's now accepted her fate and has made it her mission to promote wellness — and smelling good — wherever she goes. But that wasn't initially the goal.

In fact, she hadn't wanted to own a business at all.

"This was accidentally established in 2017," she said. "Be careful with your hobbies."

Her interest in skincare started early in her marriage. While on a road trip with her in-laws in New Mexico, she asked her mother-in-law what products she was using.

"And she said, 'Oh honey. We just put whatever was in the kitchen on our face. Don't ask me, I make my own stuff,'" Miller said. "So I said, 'Well, cool. Send me some recipes because that sounds fun.'"

Then began the research into the importance of skincare not only for outward appearance, but for overall health. The skin is the first line of defense for the

immune system, and Miller soon learned hers was very sensitive.

"I really was somebody who used a lot of commercial and conventional skincare, a lot of perfumes and I had headaches and allergies, and I just thought that came with life," she said. "And so I noticed that when my mother-in-law gave me these recipes and I started making my own skincare, I just felt better."

It didn't take long before Miller experienced a huge relief from her allergies and headaches. Next, she got good at taking the existing recipes and making new ones.

"And I got really good at what I do by making about 10,000 mistakes in little Tupperware jars," she said. "And when I got really good, on about the 10,000th jar, people started saying, 'Can I have some?'"

It was 2014 and the business had no name, but it did have products in Tupperware containers, sealed with packing tape. But people still wanted the products and she still enjoyed making them for gifts.

**"This was accidentally established in 2017.
Be careful with your hobbies." – Katy Miller**

Katy Miller, founder of Lillie & Pine, poses for a portrait on Friday, July 18, in Moline. Miller, who started making products as a hobby, named the handmade bath and body gift shop after the two streets she grew up on.

Katelyn Metzger





Lillie & Pine's line of Sarcastic Lotion includes five scents that come in 10 ounce bottles. *Katelyn Metzger*

"If you ask my family, at one point they said, 'What are you going to make next? Elbow serum, right arm soap, left arm soap?'" she said with a laugh. "I was making everything."

Before long, her friends and family saw the vision of a business. But Miller wasn't buying it.

"I never had any ambition to own my own business," she said. "I said, 'That

sounds crazy, selling soap and lotion for a living.' But what they said is focus on your core competencies."

Instead of launching a product line with dozens of items, Miller slowed it down and started focusing on lotion. It was an instant best seller.

With the products now selling, Miller needed to come up with a name for her company. She thought back to her

childhood home, where she grew up on Lillie Avenue and Pine Street.

Being a self-taught chemist, Miller credited the mistakes in the Tupperware jars for how she perfected her craft. She knew she was looking for a lotion with a rich scent but satin-like texture that wasn't greasy.

She spent two years on the recipe, often passing it through what she called the "iPhone test." After applying the lotion she'd swipe her finger across the screen to see if it left a mark. When it finally didn't, she knew she had the right recipe.

"I did get good enough at the chemistry where I've been able to write a few molecular structures," she said.

It's something she's proud of, considering chemistry was not her strongest subject in school. She was more focused on writing and thought she'd be a journalist.

Instead, she combined the skills for her own business with the writing skills coming in handy when its time to make labels and write product descriptions for her website. In addition to her own brand,

Instead of launching a product line with dozens of items, Miller slowed it down and started focusing on lotion. It was an instant best seller.

"When I want to create a product for someone I have no shared background with, I do all the research and watch all the interviews. Journalism has opened all the doors for chemistry." – Katy Miller

Miller makes products for Bella, a boutique in LeClaire, and Sanctuary Studios in Moline.

"I've even gone as far as LA six times now to pitch a product for Snoop Dog," she said. "A hemp lotion using his own hemp."

The details are still in the works, but Miller has the packaging and presentation all laid out. She ended up on Snoop's doorstep after working on another product for music artist Waka Flocka Flame.

That interaction happened at the Freight House Farmer's Market in Davenport where Miller had set up a pop-up shop for her products. Someone who worked for him came to her booth and the pair began talking.

Miller had been working on a tattoo balm she wanted to pitch to someone. She suggested they could call it Waka Wax.

"And then I found myself on Facetime with Waka Flocka two weeks later," she said.

Immediately the rapper was impressed by the packaging Miller created, because it matched his cars. He couldn't believe it, Miller said, but it's a point in her business where the journalism and chemistry meet.

"When I want to create a product for someone I have no shared background with, I do all the research and watch all the interviews," she said. "Journalism has opened all the doors for chemistry."

Miller has since created a sample for Waka Flocka Flame, but no official orders have been placed. And, that's OK, too.

Brand exposure and getting to see new parts of the world mean just as much to her as collaborations. What's led to her success, she said, is wearing her "Quad-Cities personality like a 10-gallon hat."

"It's very hard to stand out in markets like (LA) but what can help is when you're from a place like this," she said.



(Top) Lillie & Pine's Gentle Bar Soap comes in five different scents. (Bottom) Mama & Baby all purpose balm is a plant-based balm that is free of fragrance, dyes, and preservatives that can be used for diaper rash, stretch marks and nursing.

Katelyn Metzger



(Above) Lillie & Pine founder Katy Miller fills bottles of her Beautiful Flower Power Hemp Lotion on Friday, July 18, in Moline. *Katelyn Metzger*



Asking questions and seeing how she can work with people and not for them often sets her apart, she said. Brand executives in bigger cities are used to people wanting things from them, but not so much the Midwestern nice that invites collaboration and solutions.

But even the Midwest has its challenges.

When Miller launched in 2017 she opened a booth in The Spotlight Theatre in Moline. The building has been transformed into a neighborhood of shops for business owners like Miller.

She attempted to merge the company with another shop nearby, but the chemistry was harder to grasp than expected. Instead, she relaunched again in 2023, starting Lillie & Pine all over again.

"It's really been a couple years now with the challenge of what direction we want to go in," she said.

(Left) Katy Miller shows off a bottle for her Beautiful Flower Power Hemp Lotion on Friday, July 18, in Moline. The hemp lotion is CBD and THC free, using only a proprietary terpene blend.

Katelyn Metzger

Shortly after outgrowing the booth, Miller purchased an 8,500 square foot building in Moline. It was a big upgrade from the 1,000 square foot production facility she had been using, but it wasn't quite right for retail and was going to be listed for sale soon.

"And what I've found and heard from my customers, is that they want to see us in a lot of retail locations, if not our own," she said.

Narrowing down the perfect place for a flagship store is easier said than done, it turns out. Instead of focusing on one location, Miller has her sights set much bigger and has a goal to be in 20 retail locations by the end of 2025.

It's the perfect formula for a business based on smell and texture. Those two things are what set her products apart from others, she said, and are why she continues the hard work of being a business owner.

"I found that my 'why' since I was little was to always make people feel comfortable in their own skin and to make people feel good," she said. "That

translated to the chemistry of skincare. Every product that I make is designed to feel perfect in your skin. It's designed to perform without you knowing it's on you, except for the smell and the softness of your skin."

Miller can't possibly decide which product she likes the best.

"I can distinctly remember the moment that I created each one of these recipes, or decided on each scent," she said. "They're so very personal to me."

Being part of a personal routine, too, is a goal for Miller. Before making her own products, she used lotion every day to combat dry skin. After making her own products, she only needs it a few times a week.

"I use less because it's cleaner. It just works better, lasts longer and it's efficient," she said. "I worked really hard on the chemistry part."

And, her hard work was noticed by others in the industry.

Instead of focusing on one location, Miller has her sights set much bigger and has a goal to be in 20 retail locations by the end of 2025.



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Lillie & Pine's Milk & Honey Eau De Parfum is a light scent that comes in a 1.75 fluid ounce bottle. *Katelyn Metzger*

"This is a hobby
gone terribly right."

– Katy Miller

Shortly after launching Lille & Pine, Miller was approached by the company Iowa Naturals. They'd been around for 20 years and specialized in self-care products.

The owner was looking to retire and offered to sell it to Miller, who declined. A few years later the new owners approached Miller again, asking if she wanted to purchase the company.

They'd bought it as a side-hustle, but were expecting their first child and didn't have the time to continue the operation. Miller relented, and expanded her line to include their products as well.

It's a lot of work, she admitted, owning her own company and being one of just a handful of employees, but over the years the business became part of her family.

"When you create every label, every ingredient, the packaging; I spent hours researching and testing and all the labels I designed myself. Every part of this business, down to the photography on our website, the coding on our website, washing the dishes. I've been involved in everything the way a mother is involved with a child," she said.

But it's not just part of the family. It's a family business, it's her life's work and it's proof 10,000 mistakes in Tupperware jars aren't all mistakes.

"This is a hobby gone terribly right," Miller said.

**It's a lot of work, she admitted, owning her own company
and being one of just a handful of employees, but over
the years the business became part of her family.**

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G's Gourmet Popcorn –

Popping up snacks for the Quad-Cities for seven years

Owner John Gnatovich began making popcorn seven years ago. As a dentist, he would take his employees to Chicago for their yearly office celebration. While they were there, they would buy artisanal popcorn and bring it back home. After realizing that there was a need for the fun snack in the Quad-Cities, Gnatovich started his business – G's Gourmet Popcorn.



1. Owner John Gnatovich poses for a portrait in G's Gourmet Popcorn storefront on Tuesday, Aug. 12, in Moline. Gnatovich, who recently retired in June as a dentist, will now have extra time to run the shop. **2.** A batch makes roughly 120 cups, which will be split into fifteen 8 cup bags. **3.** G's Gourmet Popcorn owner John Gnatovich pours popcorn kernels into a popcorn machine on Tuesday, Aug. 12, in Moline. Gnatovich started popping the snack for the Quad-Cities seven years ago. **4.** G's Gourmet Popcorn offers over 50 flavors including different flavor combinations and variety packs. *Katelyn Metzger*

5. G's Gourmet Popcorn can create customized batches for weddings, gender reveal parties, corporate events and more. 6. G's Gourmet Popcorn owner John Gnatovich scrapes freshly popped popcorn into a bucket on Tuesday, Aug. 12, in Moline. The holes in the tray help to separate out kernels and smaller pieces from the rest of the batch. 7. G's Gourmet Popcorn is located at 1522 15th Street in Moline. 8. Gnatovich pours melted cheddar flavoring onto a fresh batch of popcorn at G's Gourmet Popcorn on Tuesday, Aug. 12, in Moline. 9. Gnatovich uses a large metal tumbler to help coat the popcorn in flavoring at G's Gourmet Popcorn on Tuesday, August 12, in Moline. 10. The Variety Mix is G's Gourmet Popcorn's most colorful snack, featuring sweet, fruity flavors. *Katelyn Metzger*





11. Seasonal flavors that will be available for fall include Apple Cider and Pumpkin Spice. **12.** John Cnatovich adds butter-flavored coconut oil to a popcorn machine before making a fresh batch of G's Gourmet Popcorn on Tuesday, Aug. 12, in Moline. Sunflower oil is used in the Slender Popcorn batches for fewer calories. *Katelyn Metzger*

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Buttercupp Candles ignites creativity in LeClaire

GRETCHEN TESKE
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The "how hard can it be" gene runs strong in Jennifer and KC Cupp. The pair have been married for 29 years and following their passions

together as entrepreneurs for 24 of those years. And, it's how one business led to another, with the pair trying to solve a problem with what they thought would be a simple solution.

"We had a little shop in Milan, and this would have been 2017-2018ish. It was full of things made locally," Jennifer

said. "One thing that we had a hard time finding was candles that were made locally, and that we could get more than two or three at a time."

Plenty of folks were making candles as a hobby, she said. But it was difficult to put together a full order for the store. They ended up ordering from a company

(Opposite) **Jennifer and KC Cupp** pose in the Buttercupp Candles candle bar and retail shop on Tuesday, July 29, in LeClaire. Together the couple produces the company's merchandise and runs the shop's candle making classes.

Katelyn Metzger

outside of the community, and the candles were consistently best sellers.

After watching the products fly off the shelves, the pair asked themselves the question: How hard can it be?

"We bought some supplies and thought, 'Oh, this can't be too hard, we'll just make our own candles,'" Jennifer said with a grin. "Yeah. They were terrible."

The candle supplies were quickly put into a box and stored away. They were only re-found after the Cupps were cleaning things out after closing their store, K+J Living. Seeing the box again gave KC an idea.

"My husband said, 'You know. You're really good at researching, why don't you spend some time on this and really think about it. I think you could make a really good candle if you figure it out,'" Jennifer said. "So that's what I did. I just went to town doing research and figuring things out and we came up with a really good recipe."

With the formula figured out, they decided to use their last name, Cupp, as inspiration for the brand and came up with Buttercupp Candles.

The first business location was their basement, Jennifer said. Then the garage. And then the basement and the garage.

"We'd get these big deliveries that would come and then we'd have the garage doors open," she said. "So the

Buttercupp Candles' best seller Cody Road, which is named after the street where the storefront is located, contains earthy fragrance notes of bergamot, teakwood and sandalwood.

Katelyn Metzger

Starting a business during the pandemic might seem like an incredible risk. But, the Cupps were onto something. With most people confined to their homes, they wanted their spaces to smell good.

neighbors would be like, 'What are you doing? It smells amazing.'"

It didn't take long to outgrow that space, and the Cupps needed to move into a new one for the manufacturing.

Initially, the goal was to work with other stores and have them carry the products. But, six weeks before their launch, the COVID-19 pandemic set in.

Starting a business during the pandemic might seem like an incredible risk. But,

the Cupps were onto something. With most people confined to their homes, they wanted their spaces to smell good.

Buttercupp Candles was more than happy to deliver. There was just one problem: people typically choose candles based on scent. Without a physical store, that could be tricky. But not for the Cupps.

"We immediately got together a sample kit. To this day we still offer that on our website, and it's literally our entire kit of





Buttercupp Candles produces candles, wax melts and room spray in every all of their signature scents. *Katelyn Metzger*

sample scents, so they can put them in a wax warmer and it's one of every scent that we carry," Jennifer said.

And, there was a second lesson they learned along with that.

"It immediately showed us how important it was to put the scent notes on our candles," she said. "You can't just call it a cute name and have people assume that's going to smell like something. So it was really important to write really clear descriptions."

As soon as one problem was solved, another popped up. This time, it was supply chain shortages

At that time, the Cupps were making their candles in glass jars, but found due to the shortages that they couldn't get the jars. They were, however, able to get tin containers, which later became a staple for them, allowing them to sell candles in more sizes.

It was that lesson in adjustment that helped solidify something they already knew: trust the process.

"You can't be so hard-nosed on your business plan that you're unwilling to pivot," KC said. "We've always realized that you have to be open minded. Those are some of the best pivots we made."

Those pivots led to multiple changes in venue for the business along the way. Buttercupp Candles had outgrown their home and moved into a commercial space in Moline, opening before customers were allowed in, per COVID restrictions in Illinois.

They quickly outgrew that space, too, but managed to get their candles into Skeleton Key, a gift shop in Rock Island; Grasshoppers, a gift shop in LeClaire; and the Freight House Farmer's Market in Davenport. With more company recognition came more feedback from customers.

"You can't be so hard-nosed on your business plan that you're unwilling to pivot." – Jennifer Cupp

Letting customers make their own candles wasn't just about getting them in the door, but giving them a new way to make memories.

KC and Jennifer Cupp talk about opening Buttercupp Candles during the pandemic on Tuesday, July 29, in LeClaire. *Katelyn Metzger*





Buttercupp quickly grew from candles to room sprays, pet sprays, wax melts and more. With the business booming, the Cupps wanted show customers some appreciation by letting them into the business in the most unique way they could.

"Everyone was such a big cheerleader for us and were so invested in what we were doing," Jennifer said. "We were like 'How cool would it be to invite them in and get to do a little bit of what we do?'"

And that's what they did.

In the fall of 2022, Buttercupp Candles opened a DIY candle bar and shop at 429 N. Cody Road in LeClaire. Customers get to choose from purchasing their favorite scent in premade candle form or making their own.

With 100 scents to choose from, the options are nearly endless. The process starts by choosing a jar for the candle, then up to three scents to mix together to create their own product. Customers pour, mix and decorate their own label then leave it on the shelf to cool.

The shop is strategically placed near one end of the commercial district along Cody Road, allowing customers to walk the street to do some shopping before coming back in a few hours to collect their new candle. KC said the DIY option has been well received by the community.

A range of people from grandparents and grandkids to bridal parties to those participating in a corporate outing have all come through the door, he said. Letting customers make their own candles

Buttercupp Candles retail store on Tuesday, July 29, in LeClaire.

Katelyn Metzger

wasn't just about getting them in the door, but giving them a new way to make memories.

"It's to help people relax and enjoy life through the products and services we make," he said. "When we bring something out, it's like, 'OK. How is this going to help somebody either connect with people they love, reconnect with someone or help them connect with the memory?' And scent is such a huge piece of that."



Buttercup Candles currently produces 24 combinations of scents in their signature collection. All of their candles are made from soy wax, which is free from phthalates, lead and parabens. *Katelyn Metzger*

The warm reception is one of the things that surprised Jennifer the most.

"I think sometimes, when you look at the greats like Whitey's and Hungry Hobo and places that have been around for a long time, we're starting to see us lumped into those categories," she said, adding there was a back to school rush to get room sprays for college dorms.

The future is burning bright for the pair, who continue to launch new scents seasonally and are equal parts grateful and proud of their success that is sure to continue.

"It's the first business we've done where we feel like it's becoming an anchor, or a staple of what represents a part of the Quad-Cities," KC said. "It's kind of surreal; a little bit mind-blowing."

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Dot's Pots turns clay into useable art

Dot's Pots owners **Dan Lawrence and Dorothy Beach** pose for a portrait in their storefront in Moline on Thursday, Aug. 21. Together, the couple creates whimsical pottery ranging from mugs and bowls to animal figurines and ornaments.

Katelyn Metzger

GRETCHEN TESKE

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Dorothy Beach was always drawn to creating art. In fact, she molded her career after it.

The owner of Dot's Pots in Moline, Beach has been creating handmade pottery for decades, following her life's passion of creating beautiful things.

"I loved anything art, so I did drawing and painting and calligraphy," she said.

An East Moline native, Beach attended United Township High School, then Black Hawk College in Moline and finally Augustana College in Rock Island. She eventually made her way to Davenport, where she taught pottery classes at the Davenport Pottery Guild.

In 1991, she met Dan Lawrence, a local hair stylist who had been taking pottery classes for a few years. They decided to stay together and make pottery for the rest of their lives, getting married in 2012.

Lawrence has multiple roles in Beach's life; the top two are being her husband and business partner. But behind the scenes, he's her biggest fan, quick to brag about her skills and share that her pottery classes were the most popular, often with a waiting list.

"Any place she is, people want to be in the room," Lawrence said.

While still early in her career, Beach decided to test that theory by setting up a

booth at art fairs on the weekends, selling pottery she and Lawrence had made. Everything sold quickly, from coffee mugs to plates to miniature moose figurines, which were her most popular item.

Before long, a quick chat with the accountant turned into a conversation about starting her own business. Slowly, Beach cut back on the art shows to focus

on building up an inventory for her new store. Lawrence was still cutting hair at the time but would make pots in the evening to build up inventory.

In 1997, she and Lawrence opened Dot's Pots at 2822 16th Street in Moline. A big sign went up out front, with a moose on the logo, letting customers know this wasn't just a family home anymore.

**Everything they make is food-safe
and microwave-, dishwasher-
and oven-proof.**



Dorothy Beach pulls the walls of a clay vase upward while working on a potter's wheel in her studio at Dot's Pots on Thursday, Aug. 21, in Moline.

Katelyn Metzger



The white house with the orange front door became home for the couple and their business. The couple moved upstairs and turned the main floor into a showroom. In time, they built a shed out back where they could throw their pots on site and fire them in a kiln nearby.

Everything they make, Lawrence said, is food-safe and microwave-, dishwasher- and oven-proof. Everything is fired at an extremely high temperature — 2,400 degrees Fahrenheit — to keep them nice and sturdy.

"You can put them in a kitchen sink, jostle them around with other stuff and it's not going to chip as easily," he said.

Beach and Lawrence make things in all shapes and sizes, but everything is made by hand. To start the process, Beach gets as much clay as she needs for her project and begins the wedging process: kneading the clay with her hands to warm it up.

In her shop, Beach works with two kinds of clay: a white porcelain blend and a stoneware clay that has a red hue. The porcelain blend comes out brighter due to the color and the stoneware blend is more freckled and earthy.

Next, she walks the clay to the pottery wheel and plops it in the middle, making sure it's centered.

"When you turn the wheel on, it'll be wobbly," she said. "So, you have to get it centered."

A whirring sound fills the room as she uses her foot to press down on a pedal, controlling the speed at which the wheel spins. She pins her elbows to her knees, holding her arms as still as possible as she begins to work the clay.

She puts her hands on either side of the clay, gently pinching with her thumb on the outside and forefinger on the inside, ensuring the pitcher she's making is just the right width.



(Top) Dorothy Beach throws a pot on her potter's wheel while her husband, Dan Lawrence, works on slab pottery in their studio at Dot's Pots on Thursday, Aug. 21, in Moline. (Middle) Dot's Pots utilizes both brown clay and a porcelain blend clay, which fire well together. (Bottom) Pottery tools such as ribs and clay carvers stay close to Dorothy Beach as she throws on the potter's wheel in her studio. *Katelyn Metzger*

Dorothy Beach uses a rib to smooth out a vase at Dot's Pots on Thursday, Aug. 21, in Moline.

Katelyn Metzger

"You want the same thickness from the top to the bottom, so I'm trying to feel how thick it is and then lift that extra clay down there and bring it up," she said, using her chin to point to the bottom of the pitcher. "Now I'm going to shape it."

Taking a rib, a long tool rounded on the end, Beach slowly brings the tool up the side of the pitcher repeatedly, smoothing out any extra lines. Then, she slowly begins to push on one side, molding it carefully with her hands to make a spout.

With the pitcher now shaped the way she wants it, Beach then takes a long wire and runs it along the bottom, separating the pitcher from the wheel. The whole process only takes her a few minutes, but getting good and being fast are two skills that came with time.



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Dot's Pots owner Dorothy Beach can be seen through a shelf in her storefront showing off her works of functional art. Everything for sale at Dot's Pots is food safe, microwave, dishwasher and oven proof. *Katelyn Metzger*

"When I first started, I was horrible," she said with a laugh.

Nothing seemed to turn out right: the walls would cave in; her teachers would walk behind her, shaking their heads as her hands shook from the nerves. Instead of giving up, she purchased a pottery wheel and put it in her basement so she could practice, getting it just right.

"I just had to (practice) when nobody else was around," she said. "There was no

pressure, so I could do it. Then I learned more, and I didn't feel bad about going back into class."

The persistence paid off, and Beach can now whip up something like a pitcher in as little as five minutes. Once it's hardened, Beach applies a handle then takes the pitcher over to a small kiln.

The electric kiln is a round container, about three feet off the ground with a flip up lid and thermometer. Everything

at Dot's Pots is fired twice, to ensure its durable. After the initial firing, it's time for glazing.

Along the backwall in Beach's studio are large garbage cans with various glazes that all look similar in color. They don't change color until fired, she explained.

The glazes look like vats of plaster with water floating on top, but that's because they separate when sitting. Using a large mixer, she blends the mix until the consistency is smooth, then dips the pitcher in.

It comes out from the electric kiln shiny then goes into a second, larger gas kiln where it's fired and the glaze becomes glass-like. The larger kiln can hold about 100 items, which stay in for about 12 hours until the kiln reaches a temperature of 2,400 degrees.

The pottery stays in the kiln for the next 36 hours until it's time to remove it and finish the final steps, if there are any. Once the items are ready for retail, Beach carries them inside to the shop where shelves are lined with homemade goods.

"You can put them in a kitchen sink, jostle them around with other stuff and it's not going to chip as easily." - Dan Lawrence



Tiny animal figurines are for sale at Dot's Pots. Most are made by Dorothy Beach, who uses her imagination when creating the fictitious characters.

Katelyn Metzger

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(Above) Metal cookie cutters used to create fun shapes in clay hang from a string around the Dot's Pots studio.
Katelyn Metzger



Knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses when creating pottery, the husband and wife duo work together efficiently. The couple met in a pottery class at the Davenport Pottery Guild and have been working together ever since.

Katelyn Metzger

From magnets to platters to vases to lawn ornaments, there's something for everyone inside. Beach no longer does customer orders, and she doesn't ship. She's built up her clientele enough that they know where to find her.

And if she's not in the shop, there's a good chance she's in the studio. She starts her day out there at 4:30 a.m. every day, after all.

"I take breaks. I come in and eat and then I go back out and then I work and then I come back in and if I have to do paperwork, I do paperwork," she said. "But we usually end up closing up the shop out there about 8 at night."

It's almost like working two jobs, she said, one in the shop and one in the store. But it's no big deal to her. It's just business.

"I'm not complaining about it," she said. "It's what I want to do."



Dan Lawrence creates a log out of a slab of brown clay at the Dot's Pots on Thursday, Aug. 21, in Moline. Dorothy Beach will later add a woodland animal to sit atop of the log.

Katelyn Metzger

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