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Jane Pollak

Shawn Blau
Sacred Heart University

Laurence Weinstein
Sacred Heart University

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From Eggs to the Stars

Jane Pollak Artist

Jane Pollak is a Westport, Connecticut, artist who started her career as a high school art teacher. She has now branched out into public speaking, is the author of two books, and embraces the life of entrepreneur as a sole proprietor of her rapidly expanding business of decorating eggs. For Jane, her life path has been one of hope and unexpected personal and business achievements.

NEJE: Your background of artist, then entrepreneur, and now a sought-after public speaker and author sounds so varied. When did the spark of inspiration come?

Pollak: There wasn't a direct path, if that's what you're looking for. My mom did own her own business. She was a party planner and I helped her out when I could. Before that, my sister for a time ran her own business decorating matchboxes with felt for sale in the neighborhood. So I guess you could say I picked up some things from family.

NEJE: When did you realize you were a talented artist?

Pollak: The "talented" part came later, but as a child I was one of four siblings and we each seemed to pick up a label that we had to live up to. One sister was "the writer," another sister was the "pretty one," and my brother was "the funny one." I was "the artist."

NEJE: Did you also consider using your creative interests and being in business for yourself at a young age?

Pollak: No, not at all. I grew up in the 1950s and 60s when there were almost no women that I knew of who had their own businesses. In that culture, women were encouraged and expected to become either teachers or nurses. So it was with me as well.

I took some education classes at Mount Holyoke College and later graduated from Columbia University's Teachers College. However, the seed was planted very early on for my later career interests because I actually started my undergraduate degree at George Washington University. I took nine hours in drawing and really enjoyed the classes. While at Mount Holyoke, I pursued my creative interests by studying studio art and theatre as my major.

NEJE: So that helps explain your first job as an art teacher in a nearby high school.

Pollak: Yes it does. I enjoy being an artist and felt

comfortable teaching the subject to young people. However, I was brand new to the field, there was no curriculum to follow, and I must say it was pretty tricky at first figuring out what to do to keep up the students' interest.

What happened that first year was absolutely serendipitous. Back when I was seven or eight years old, my dad brought home a Ukrainian egg from work. I greatly admired it, then forgot about that experience for the next twenty years. When one of my colleagues suggested that I have my class decorate Ukrainian eggs for Easter, I was hesitant and a bit concerned about using class time for what might be perceived as a quasi-religious purpose.

My colleague showed me how to use a Rapidograph-like, fine-point stylus to decorate the eggs and I caught on to the technique right away. It takes patience and a steady hand, but my students enjoyed the egg decorating and a one- or two-day project actually lasted six weeks. The students loved it and so did I!

NEJE: So your business got started?

Pollak: No, not right away. I did call the *New York Times* and they ended up printing a two-column article about the class in 1973. Their interest in the egg-decorating class project affirmed how I felt about the experience so it stuck with me. The actual business came later.

NEJE: How much later?

Pollak: I stayed with teaching for two years, from 1972 to 1974. After that I got pregnant with our first child and left the field. During that time I exhibited at my first craft shows. I devoted myself to raising our three children, but kept up my artwork on the side exhibiting in one or two craft shows a year—hardly a career. Someone must have noticed my work because I was invited by the White House to design Easter eggs for the annual White House Easter egg hunt in 1981. The invitation came from "out of the blue" and I was flattered to be considered worthy of that kind of attention.

I started decorating eggs on a fairly regular basis at that time and sold them for \$8 apiece. Some artists use a canvas; I decided that eggs would be my mode of self-expression. It's very fine work. Each egg takes roughly two to three hours of intense concentration, and during the creative process I am completely "in the zone." I am literally unaware of time passing or what is happening around me. I feel completely alive and totally involved in what I am doing!

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NEJE: Are we ready for the “ta da! A business is born”?

Pollak: Almost! During the 1980s, my work was still more a hobby than a business. In 1985, *Country Living* printed an article on quilt designs I was painting on the eggs and that seemed to generate more interest in what I was doing. In fact, I think I raised my prices after the article to \$75 an egg! In 1987, our last child went off to kindergarten and I had more time to think about where I wanted to take my creative interests.

Although my business was growing steadily financially, I thought I wanted something with more status and a steady paycheck. I saw an advertisement for an arts administrator in New Haven. They were looking for someone with an academic background who had a teaching degree and experience in the art field.

The pay was \$40,000 per year and that was an excellent salary back then. I hadn't updated my resume for a while, so I went to the alumnae office at Mount Holyoke and asked for assistance.

The woman assigned to help me asked what I was doing at the time. After I told her about my creative pursuits, she responded, “Why would you want to do anything else?” Her comment really surprised me. It made me take stock of my life and for the first time consider what being an entrepreneur would involve. By the way, I sent in my updated resume anyway for the arts administrator job but never did get called for an interview. That helped me make the decision to turn my egg decorating business into more of a full-time venture.

It was a true turning point in my life. I promised myself I would do the very best I could to succeed at it.

NEJE: Did you prepare a business plan?

Pollak: Not until 1989. I attended a full-year course offered by the American Women's Economic Development Corp. (AWED) in New York. The course was designed for women who were small business owners and we were each asked to generate our own business plan. I think I was the only one who actually took the time to do it, but it was a great experience and well worth the time and effort.

NEJE: What else did you learn from the course?

Pollak: The main thing I learned was the importance of developing my own brand identity. That involved things like creating a logo, a business card, my website, the right combinations of copy and visuals to use and so on. It wasn't easy. I went through several iterations and finally realized that spending money to hire a real pro for this type of marketing communication was very, very important.

I'm proud of what I've accomplished and I welcome your readers to see for themselves how my business has evolved. They can check out my website at www.janepollak.com.

NEJE: How did your business develop?

Pollak: I started entering my decorated eggs into juried craft shows and exhibited in about 10 such shows a year.

My big break came at a trade show where I wound up with \$7,000 worth of orders for my eggshell jewelry! I was so excited. I called my duck egg source and told them I needed dozens and dozens of eggs. I use hen eggs for the decorated eggs and duck eggs for the jewelry pieces. They told me, “Duck eggs only start becoming available in the spring of each year. We don't have any to sell you.” Did I ever learn about entrepreneurship then! I scrambled until I could get ahold of a new vendor. It was quite the scene.

NEJE: In your book, *Soul Proprietor*, you spend a considerable amount of time discussing how important it is to work on self-development. How come?

Pollak: Before there can be business development there has to be personal development. It's hard, but one has to learn that being rejected in a business environment is not the same as personal rejection. If orders stop coming in, for instance, I have to remind myself what's happening is *not* about me. It's about the normal business cycle or perhaps I'm not pursuing leads aggressively enough. I have to separate my personal feelings from what's occurring in the business.

NEJE: Rejection was hard for you?

Pollak: Isn't it for everyone? We all have to deal with rejection. I was working with an executive coach some years ago and I had recently been ignored by the American Egg Board to work for them on an ongoing basis. The coach told me they weren't rejecting me, Jane Pollak. They just didn't feel my talents fit into their plans at that moment in time.

Understanding that, *accepting that*, was a big step for me as an artist because we artists like to keep ourselves in the background. “Don't look at me, look at my work.” Most artists would rather “hunker down” in their studios than face hearing negative things about their efforts or risk rejection. Our whole being in a way is held up for public scrutiny every time we show our work. We're awfully sensitive as a group. So I had to desensitize myself and understand how to separate my business self from my artist self.

I work pretty much alone. There are two high school art students who come in for about ten hours a week to help me out. Otherwise, it's just me and it can be very isolating. I listen to educational business and motivational tapes while I'm painting to keep my mind occupied and my focus where it should be. Wayne Dyer, Roger Dawson, and Brian Tracy are my personal favorites.

I also joined Toastmasters to become a better public speaker. This has given me enormous self-confidence. I write a vision statement at the end of every year and I keep it posted right next to my workbench. This motivates me to ask myself continually if I am doing everything I can to meet those goals. If I'm not meeting my goals, then I have to ask myself, “What *should* I be doing differently? I just can't sit here and hope things will turn out differently.

I am in control of my destiny. Now what do I have to do to make it a reality?”

NEJE: How is business for you now?

Pollak: Well, I can tell you that it will cost you \$300 an egg if you want to buy one today. Also, I'm paid thousands of dollars to share with audiences what I've learned. That's progress! Business ebbs and flows, but I am satisfied with my work and the visions I have changed into reality.

NEJE: Your earrings are stunning. Did you make them as well?

Pollak: Yes, I started producing a line of earrings several years ago. I make the earrings from eggshells that are filled with epoxy. They sell from \$59 on up for a set. I decided to go into jewelry items because you can't stay in one place as an entrepreneur. You need to keep pursuing ideas to keep yourself fresh and interesting to your customers. If you have a new product idea to develop, keep showing up, and keep working on developing yourself. Eventually, that kind of persistence and hard work will pay off!

—S.B.

—L.W.