

# Local Entrepreneurs Turn Hobbies into Full-Time Occupations

*These Dallas entrepreneurs turned their leisure-time passions into successful storefronts.*

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## ***JESSIE SADBERRY { kicking into overdrive }***

Jessie SADBERRY is the first to describe himself as “hard core.”

He won't mess with AA batteries or flimsy throwaway gadgets sold on the cheap by big-box retailers. When SADBERRY sells you a pint-sized airplane, power boat, or monster truck to be zoomed around at whim, it's all about accuracy to scale, handheld radio controls, and how well they move. These little vehicles, fueled by electricity, nitro, or gasoline, will do anything you can do in the real world, only smaller. Just don't call them “toys.” (He'll correct you.) These are hobby-grade, remote-controlled miniatures.

In 2002, SADBERRY was on the road, traveling as a senior manager for a Big Four consulting firm. Radio-controlled miniatures, his passion since childhood, had become a grown-up stress-buster—a way to kick back and blow off corporate steam.

SADBERRY hunted for an online community where collectors like himself could share information and spare parts but came up empty-handed. He was tired of traveling and wanted to spend more time at home with his growing family, so he took a gamble. He left his corporate job and went to work at home, establishing a Web portal to serve radio-control enthusiasts around the globe. He bought \$50,000 worth of salvage parts from his new online buddies and stockpiled them in his garage. He rebuilt and restored the components and marketed them through his Web site.

Soon the venture was earning thousands of dollars a month. “I decided to make a step, to not just have an appearance on the Web, but create something I could do for the rest of my life and not have to go back to the corporate world,” SADBERRY says. He launched a Plano store and purchased additional online hobby sites to fold into his Web portfolio. Now, five years after leaving his job, he's got two employees and a growing “click and mortar” business that grosses half a million dollars a year.

As with any business, branding helps. SADBERRY learned his lesson early. Originally, the store was named Boss Models International. When the Yellow Pages put their listing under modeling agencies, SADBERRY found himself fielding glossy photos of wannabe talent. But ever since he changed the name to BMI Hobbies International, customers ages 8 to 88 have had no trouble racing to his door.

## ***PAT and CHERI NEIL { On the Right Track }***

At 6'5", Pat Neil is hard to overlook. And in the small world of model trains, he's an especially big presence. Together with wife Cheri, he owns and operates one of the top 10 model train stores in the country, doing over \$1 million in business a year.

While most competitors specialize in a single style of model train, the Neils carry four different sizes at Collectible Trains and Toys, their 6,000-square-foot Farmers Branch store. They've got diminutive "Z scale" trains, which run on a pencil-width track, and sturdier cousins designed to run in the backyard or around a swimming pool. Then there's the popular "O" gauge, or quarter-inch scale, which most people know as Lionel trains.

Pat and Cheri are among the Lionel elites. They're a direct distributor and one of only 50 authorized warranty service centers. "We can fix any Lionel train made since 1900," says Pat, who will gladly give you an earful about the intricacies of all the vintage and current models he carries. By specializing in antique trains and encouraging customer trade-ins, they've carved out their own niche, he believes.

High-school sweethearts turned business partners, Pat and Cheri have been in business together for 26 of their 38 years of marriage. She pays the bills and handles promotions; he is the towering train geek who knows classic models inside out. When Pat isn't out on the shop floor talking to customers, he is traveling across the country buying up collections for resale. Most of their merchandise goes for anywhere from \$1 to \$5,000. The most expensive train he's sold yet: \$69,000.

When the store first opened, it catered exclusively to adult enthusiasts. Five years in, the Neils struggled with kids who wouldn't behave while their parents shopped. So they set up a display of wooden trains in the corner to distract the kids and quickly got a lesson in the obvious. "Our business changed overnight," Pat says. "Within six months, 30 percent of our business was little kids. Sometimes you can be too close to a situation, and that's what happened to us. We should have done this way earlier."

When young train buffs outgrow the wooden starter sets, they pester their parents for more elaborate sets, and it's back to visit the Neils. Eventually, these hobbyists grow up and have families too, creating a new generation of train lovers. It's viral marketing, family-style.

## ***BUDDY AND JUDY SAUNDERS { masters of the universe }***

Buddy Saunders was a young, married art teacher in 1977 when he borrowed \$1,500 to open up a comic book store on a side street in Arlington. Within a year, shop receipts matched his school salary. So Saunders shed his mild-mannered teacher's garb and leapt full-time into the world of superheroes.

By 1985, the business had grown enough to allow Saunders' wife Judy to leave her managerial job with the federal government and join the day-to-day operation. Today, Lone Star Comics has eight retail locations around the Dallas-Fort Worth area, a substantial online presence, and 110 employees who help the business earn more than \$7 million a year.

Competitors have come and gone during the past 30 years. Judy credits Lone Star's longevity to the couple's complementary strengths: Buddy is the creative, organized risk-taker with comic book expertise; Judy is a cautious administrator with personnel skills.

Their average comic book sells for \$4, but occasionally prices climb as high as \$3,000. The challenge is how to optimize profit on high-volume, low-ticket items whose prices fluctuate without warning. "One

book may suddenly become really hot, and you need to respond to that before all your copies are wiped out a low price," Buddy says. Staying on top of the collectible comic universe is not for the faint-hearted: There are more than 20,000 different titles in existence, and each of these can occur in at least eight different letter grades and 24 different numerical grades of condition.

Perhaps the biggest beating Lone Star Comics took was paying for a computer system that never got delivered. "It wasn't a matter of them being dishonest," Buddy says. "It was the programmers not really understanding the business or giving realistic estimates." Fortunately, the Saunders' son Conan (named equally for the Sherlock Holmes author and the comic book hero) had recently graduated from MIT with a degree in computer science. He got the computer system up on its feet and automated processes to help increase efficiency.

With a more robust computer system in place, online sales have taken off. Lone Star is adding warehouse space and Judy is keeping her employees, all of whom require a specialized knowledge, extremely busy. "On the Internet, our biggest sellers are the back-issue, older comics," Judy says. "In that area we have no peer. We have the single largest selection of individual titles of back-issue comics you can find anywhere in the world."