

focus on the entrepreneur

Vision Quest

The Venture Center at Fox Valley Technical College helped open Kristin Benson Ellsworth's eyes to a world of new possibilities.

By Vicki Stavig

Sometimes an idea for a new business comes when you least expect it. In the case of Kristin Benson Ellsworth, attempts to get her young daughter to wear her glasses led to starting Peeps Eyewear, a wholesaler of glasses designed for children ages 3 to 6.

Ellsworth, who had earned an undergraduate degree in business and then a law degree, credits the Venture Center at Fox Valley Technical College for giving her the tools to start Peeps Eyewear. "Everything came together with Fox Valley Technical College," she says. "It was the springboard to start my business. Its resources and mentors helped me move forward."

When Ellsworth tried to get her 3-year-old daughter to wear her glasses, she received a curt reply. "Princesses don't wear glasses," the little girl said. So Ellsworth set out to change her daughter's viewpoint by writing a story titled, "Princesses Wear Glasses," which

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Kristin Benson Ellsworth
Founder, Peeps Eyewear

she later developed into a book that is now included with each pair of Peeps Eyewear glasses.

Taking the Next Step

In 2008, Ellsworth registered for The Venture Center's E-Seed entrepreneurship training program, which included courses on business legal structures, marketing, market research and analysis, customer relations, product pricing, and business finance.

"The next step was to make glasses, but I couldn't find manufacturers in the United States," she says. "I read about the Fab Lab at FVTC and used it to develop a 3-D image of what I wanted the glasses to look like."

After a year-long search, Ellsworth connected with a manufacturer. "The frames are made overseas, and everything is tested in the United States," she says. Ellsworth added that the books are made locally by RR Donnelley. The company prints her books from its Greenville, Wis., facility, in addition to packaging, warehousing, kitting, and shipper services for Peeps Eyewear. The girls' line, called Princess Peeps, includes two designs: a classic frame and a pink, sparkly princess frame. Ellsworth also is developing a line for boys.

Last year, Ellsworth entered her business plan in the Governor's Business Plan Contest and earned first place in the competition's Business Services division. In August, Ellsworth began selling her product line with University of



Kristin Benson Ellsworth (left) with Teresa Glasow of Wisconsin Vision.

Wisconsin Health Optical and Wink Optical in Lincoln Park, Illinois. "If it wasn't for FVTC's Venture Center, I wouldn't be this far along," Ellsworth says. "The tools and resources it provided were instrumental in getting my business off the ground. And I had a technical team behind me with the college's Fab Lab."

And, Ellsworth adds, this is only the start. "I want my glasses to be available to children throughout the country," she says. "I hope that when children get their first pair of glasses, they will walk out excited to be wearing them."

Ellsworth's goal to make Peeps Eyewear frames accessible to children throughout the U.S. took another step closer to reality when she recently landed a partnership with Wisconsin Vision, a large Midwest optical, eye exam, eyeglass, and contact lens provider with 27 locations in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Illinois. Her products are available in Wisconsin Vision select boutiques and all store locations. "We want to change the way children wear glasses," says Ellsworth. 



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Crossing the Bridge

When Fox Valley Technical College offered a Bridge to Entrepreneurship and Business course for 14 ELL (English Language Learner) students representing a range of countries, they all quickly learned the basics of starting a business in the United States or in their homelands.

"We're trying to encourage our students to look at entrepreneurship as a viable choice," says Caethe Brockman, an instructor in FVTC's Entrepreneurship and Marketing program. "With this class, we wanted to develop a product, so the students could better understand entrepreneurship."

That product was an aluminum water bottle with lettering that was laser-etched in FVTC's Fab Lab, with proceeds

going to Kiva, an online microlending bank that helps support entrepreneurs worldwide. "The students developed a timeline and pricing, did some marketing, determined expenses and profits, and assessed areas of improvement," Brockman says. They gave their profits to four businesses in Kenya, Peru, Cambodia, and Pakistan.

