

ENTREPRENEURS by Dave Szymanski | Tampa Bay Editor

Pump Pocket 'Mompreneurs'

Two Wesley Chapel moms start a business to help diabetic children after seeing the clothing challenges firsthand. The business is taking off.

They were both teachers, mothers, good friends and neighbors three doors apart in Wesley Chapel who brought their families together four nights a week for dinner.

Now, they are entrepreneurs, running a Pasco County business out of their homes that helps children around the world with juvenile diabetes by providing clothing that conceals insulin pumps using hidden pockets.

Tricia Wood, 36, and Melissa Cone, 39, are founders of Kangaroo Pump Pockets Inc., which they formed in October and formally incorporated in January. They call themselves directors. No one carries the CEO or president title.

"I'm good at problem-solving, Tricia's good at communicating," Cone says. "We both have the same attitude about business: Be part of the solution, not part of the problem."

They secured a loan with Bank of America, found a manufacturer in California, set up a Web site and are taking orders. Its first products became available in March. They've spoken to attorneys about patents, but those are difficult with textiles.

Pump Pockets is a startup, but it's off to a good start. It's profitable, pulling in more than \$10,000 in revenues in its first seven months of business and selling product as far away as Australia.

The products are clothing for children with special, hidden pockets. The pockets are sized and designed strong enough to cradle a half-pound insulin pump, which is about the size of a pager.

A buttonhole on the back of the pocket allows the narrow, 24-inch tube from the pump to the place on the child where the insulin goes in. The tube must be moved every three days. Insulin is used to fight diabetes. Children can even sleep in the clothing and not worry about being disconnected.

The alternative to insulin pumps is several daily needle injections.

The pocket clothing idea came from Wood, who's daughter Abby was diagnosed with Type I diabetes, also called juvenile diabetes, in 2002 at age 5. Her parents had to give her six insulin shots a day and test her blood



Mark Wierpke
Melissa Cone, left, and Tricia Wood are Wesley Chapel moms and former teachers turned entrepreneurs who have formed Kangaroo Pump Pockets, a Wesley Chapel company that sells children's clothes with a pocket for insulin pumps.

daily by lancing her finger.

The family then tried an alternative: an insulin pump that is attached to the child and injects insulin automatically. Abby found it difficult to run and play with other children

while having the pump visibly attached to her.

Children would point and ask, "What is that?" when they'd see the device clipped to her waist. The pump would also disconnect from its tube

when she'd play soccer, softball or gymnastics.

So Wood and Cone began researching the market for a clothing product that would conceal the pumps. Once they established a demand and saw a market opening, Wood quit her teaching job and Cone quit hers selling homes.

The product lines now include tank tops and underwear. The company is looking for another manufacturer that can respond to more orders more quickly. It is talking to companies in Tennessee and North Carolina.

Pump Pockets' marketing has mainly been through its Web site, but Wood and Cone have done some outreach work, including participating in nearly all of the fundraising walks that the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation runs throughout Florida. They have also set up a table and exhibited their products at the Children with Diabetes national conventions.

Wood and Cone are also starting a juvenile diabetes support group next month in nearby Land O' Lakes and have talked to doctors, hospitals and school nurses.

"The inroads into the diabetes community are narrow," Cone said. "You have to have them welcome you into their community. You can't just take out a magazine ad. Where can you go to directly market to a group of people spread throughout the United States?"

Wood moved to Florida from Phoenix. Cone is a St Petersburg native who taught school for 10 years, then sold homes. Both have husbands with busy executive careers and who travel on business. Both have two children each, who go to school with each other and are good friends.

Both see the business more as a calling than a commercial venture. Doctors diagnose about 35 children a day with diabetes. So they believe they have a mission.

And Cone and Wood have been mildly surprised at the progress they've made as entrepreneurs in less than a year. Securing a business loan was much faster than her experience in getting a loan for her husband's pest control business.

"We've worked hard and the doors have opened when they've needed to for us," Cone said.