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## Mom's the boss

Business-minded 'mompreneurs' raise families, create flexible businesses

By Candace Murphy, STAFF WRITER

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DREAM JOBS, like everything else, change as people do.

Like when Elizabeth Falkner was a young married go-getter and had all the attitude that went with it, a career centered around product development for lingerie made all the sense in the world. It was sexy. It was fun. It was a reflection of herself.

Fast forward a few years, though, and Falkner, like a lot of her friends, had moved on to motherhood. A life of lingerie laughably in the past, Falkner had traded teddies for teddy bears, brassieres for blankies and binkies.

Still, Falkner's go-getting hadn't gotten up and gone just because of a baby. Fearing a future filled with conversations no more scintillating than the ins and outs of potty-training, Falkner traded in a Mervyns corporate career that no longer suited her lifestyle and staked her claim to a new, more flexible career that had her creating baby and children's products out of her home.

"When you're around a baby, it gets into your brain," says Falkner, 37, who launched Mariposa Baby and developed her first product line a year ago. "But I could never be a 100 percent stay-at-home mom. I would put my eyes out. I was really career-oriented before, and to be honest, I had my first daughter just a little earlier than we'd been planning. I didn't have a ton of time to think, OK, I'm ending my career. We had a house, I couldn't afford to not work. So I thought, 'I have to have something that's not just mommy and



TOUCH OF HOME: Elizabeth Falkner runs Mariposa Baby, a baby clothing and accessories business, out of her home in Oakland. She designs all her products herself. Here she dresses a mannequin in one of her outfits in the basement of her home. LAURA A. ODA - Staff

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potty-training.' I mean, my friends and I are women with interesting careers and we're talking about pull-ups for half an hour."

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Finding a career to match a changing sensibility isn't anything new. Talk to just about any bride who became entrenched planning her own wedding, and she's likely to confess that she considered a career in wedding planning after her nuptials. Even Hollywood noted the popularity of that career with the treacy Jennifer Lopez vehicle "The Wedding Planner" in 2001.

But even J. Lo can't compete with the new wave of moms doing it for themselves, especially in Oakland. Dubbed "mompreneurs," these local moms are starting home-based wholesale businesses creating baby and children's products as much in the interest of job ownership and flexibility as filling voids they found in the infant and toddler market. And as most of them are putting their toes into the water as wholesalers for the first time, they're also capitalizing on their proximity to each other and creating their own network.

"It's crazy. I don't know if there's something in the water, but it's great," says Rockridge resident Sharon Eisenhauer, who started her own business, Haiku Bags, 21/2 years ago. "There are so many people to connect with and share resources with. One of the things I loved about the Bay Area before I moved here was that there were so many companies that I liked here — Smith and Hawken, Republic of Tea, Banana Republic. There are so many entrepreneurs out here."

Siobhan Van Winkel, the elder stateswoman of mompreneurs since opening her eponymous Oakland storefront in 2000, says she's noticed that more and more women are gravitating toward self-employment, and in particular, in fields that cater to children.

"I don't know if it's like when you buy a Toyota and then you see them everywhere, but I've noticed in terms of the clothing world, it's all women, women, women," says Van Winkel, 38, who changed her surname from Smith because she felt a fairy-tale name suited her better. "I think it's good news. Everything's changing. We're just really in the work force. The cost of living is crazy, we're trying to make money and a lot of women are trying to figure out how to stay with their children and still work."

That's exactly how Van Winkel came upon the idea to have her own store. While living in a big warehouse with a bunch of artists, Van Winkel found out she was pregnant. Though she taught art and music to kids, and was a street artist selling hats on Telegraph Avenue, Van Winkel thought having her own store selling whimsical children's products would be a perfect way for her to work and mind a child as a single mom.

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"I thought, 'Ah, this is the way,'" says Van Winkel, whose daughter, Hazel, was a year old when the store opened. "I thought ideally she'd lay in a basket and play with fabric scraps. Of course it wasn't like that at all. But it worked."

Though Van Winkel is one of the few mompreneurs who has a storefront and makes some of her own products — she's about to debut a line of children's capes in exotic fabrics — there's no question that Oakland is particularly friendly to baby-oriented businesses. And unlike the rest of an East Coast-centric fashion industry, much of the baby biz is concentrated right here.

"Oakland in general has a lot of artisan designers," says Falkner. "I mean, I feel like I've met a million people who've had a baby and decided to do a onesie of some sort."

Why the baby business has come to Oakland is the \$64,000 question. Some think it's because so many ambitious, entrepreneurial-type women become mothers and find somewhat affordable housing that's close to the resources they need in Oakland. Either that, or something really is in the water. Several self-employed moms mentioned a certain something-something about the East Bay lifestyle and environment that provides a particularly fertile ground for enterprising mompreneurs.

"We have the big Starbucks and everything, but when it comes to clothing, we just have a lot of unique mom-and-pop-owned stores that are doing modern things around here," says Kysha Mitchell of Oakland, who's launching her business, Yahzi Rose, at the end of the month when she debuts her product line at the Los Angeles Baby Celebration April 28 and 29.

Facilitating the process for these Oakland mompreneurs, says Mitchell, is an increased level of communication between parents. Whether they're networking on the Internet or meeting in the park for play group, parents are exchanging ideas and information as they seek services and products that they need or want for their new lifestyles with children.

"We have so many mom and dad groups happening — things like Tumble and Tea Cafe — and other indoor play areas where people are relating in a way that they can be adults again, not just talk goo-goo, ga-ga, and pass on information to each other," says Mitchell. "People are tired of looking at billboards and being fed information — they're seeking out those small businesses and unique things that fit them. There's just so much in the Bay Area."

Making the mompreneurs' jobs even easier is the fact that they either are their focus group, or they hang around their focus group all the time: That is, they are moms, they know what moms need, and they're also around kids and know what kids need.

At least, that's how Falkner came up with the Sleepsack, a simply designed sleep shirt that's MariposaBaby's ([www.mariposababy.com](http://www.mariposababy.com)) most popular item.

"Babies can't walk or talk, but they sure can poop in their sleep," says Falkner. "So I developed this elongated shirt — I remember I owned one that had a drawstring — but I made mine with elastic. It was so easy to change the baby when you just had to lift up the elastic, rather than undoing velcro and pulling off pants, or unsnapping a crotch."

Falkner sells her product line to stores such as Phippen Hill in Alameda, Mariposa Gifts in Santa Rosa and Goodnite Moon in Corte Madera.

Mitchell, too, looked to both her own preferences as well as what she thought would be practical for a child when she set out to design her first items at Yahzi Rose ([www.yahzirose.com](http://www.yahzirose.com)). A dancer before she was a mom, Mitchell used to design her own dance clothes because she couldn't find exactly what she wanted in the store and eventually parlayed that into a business. When she had kids, Mitchell found herself in the same position: unable to find exactly what she wanted for her children, Selah, 5, and Sharai, 2.

"I love textiles, but I couldn't find things for them that were modern, still really comfortable for kids and weren't just bunnies and elephants," says Mitchell, whose Yahzi Rose apparel, geared for kids aged 2 to 8, features a fabric she bought from villagers on a trip to West Africa. "I believe in children being stylish. They're not Mini-Me styles — your kids can go to the park in them and be comfortable, but if you want to go to dinner after that, they're fine. They won't be in sweats or anything."

Eisenhauer, though, went a different route. A self-described serial entrepreneur who began her career somewhat unconventionally as the original Wendy for Wendy's hamburgers, Eisenhauer, 45, knew she wanted to return to her passion for selling and creating the moment she found out her adoption in Japan had gone through.

"I went to Japan and came back with a 6-week old baby," says Eisenhauer, of her daughter, Kira, now 3. "I was riding BART one day and I thought, 'Oh my God. This is about diaper bags.'"

The end result was a fashionable and functional diaper bag with a Japanese aesthetic. The Haiku Bags ([www.haikubags.com](http://www.haikubags.com)) are so popular that REI and Title Nine now sell variations of them made by Eisenhauer and market them as bags for active women's lifestyles. The bags are also sold in boutiques all over San Francisco, as well as in spots including Lullaby Lane in San Bruno, Rockridge Kids in Oakland and Glow Girl in Mill Valley.

"It's great, because I have the flexibility to be with my daughter," says Eisenhauer. "She's in preschool, she's 3 now, and on the unfortunate occasion when she's sick, it's a whole lot easier to ask my boss for a sick day."

But, the question remains: Is too much of a good thing just too much? Perhaps being an Oakland mompreneur is the "it" job of today, but can the market support all the clever sleep sack-, textile-, and diaper bag-loving moms that are not only out there right now, but on the horizon?

Van Winkel has high hopes.

"Yeah, the world of baby clothes has just gone pchow! over the last six years, and everyone and their mother is making a T-shirt with something cool," says Van Winkel. "But as long as people keep having babies, hey, the more the merrier. As long as you stay true to your vision and your product, then yeah. It's awesome."

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