

Kim Kleeman



Shakespeare
SQUARED

Founder, Shakespeare Squared

Shakespeare Squared: Named one of Inc.'s 500 Fastest Growing Private Companies in America. Recognized as one of Working Mother magazine's 25 Best Small Companies. Awarded the title of Illinois Family Business of the Year. Lofty accomplishments for company founder Kim Kleeman, a woman who just a few short years ago swore she would never own her own business!

Having grown up the child of business-owner parents, Kleeman knew well the stresses and demands that entrepreneurial life can place upon a family. She met her husband, Jay, on the first day of college, and together they earned their teaching degrees and started making plans for a modest but happy life. When Jay's stint as a student teacher strained the family budget, though, they both started doing subcontract work proofing elementary school textbooks. Before long, they were taking on bigger jobs and hiring other teachers to freelance on various projects, and from that point on, they never looked back.

In 2003, the couple founded Shakespeare Squared, an educational development company that employs an army of freelancers to write and edit materials such as textbooks, lesson plans, teacher guides, activity workbooks, and test-preparation materials. Initially a home-based business managed by Kim while Jay continued his work as a high school teacher, the company now has a full-time staff of 20 and is branching out in new directions, publishing its own materials and offering an educational editing certification process. In three years' time, the company has grown by an incredible 815 percent, bringing in \$2.3 million in revenue last year.

What we learned from Kim: That the most incredible resource for launching might very well be your own friends and family. Kim started this business with her husband; her best friend since high school is her director of human resources; her sister is a remote project coordinator; her lawyer brother weighs in on various matters; her mom is a managing editor; and her parents are her de facto advisory board, with whom she meets every morning to share a cup of tea and conversation in their backyard.

Words of Wisdom

"Trust your instincts and empower your people."

From Teacher to Tycoon

"I don't know if I had a big 'aha' moment about starting a business; our growth was really organic. After my second child I immediately got pregnant with my third and there was no turning back, because we weren't going to be able to afford day care for two babies on two teachers' salaries. I had been working from home and continuously had one or two projects going, and I set a goal of having 10 projects running simultaneously. So after my son was born, I enacted my own guerilla marketing plan and e-mailed every editorial director at the big publishing companies, looking for projects. We soon landed our first big client, HarperCollins Children's Books."

Not About the Money

"I just wanted to make the best company that I could and be happy doing it. If that included millions of dollars, great, but that wasn't really the goal. I didn't know at first how much work we would end up getting, but I think the extensive classroom experience of our people sets us apart in this field. As teachers ourselves, we understand the needs of our clients and we deliver on that."

It Takes a Village

"We employ over 400 freelance writers. Most are former teachers but we pull from publishing, journalism, and other fields as well. We developed a writing test that covers everything from copyrighting to educational taboos, and prospective freelancers must earn at least a B plus. A nice plus with our business is the opportunity we can offer teachers for life beyond teaching. I really promote teachers in the classroom, but if the classroom just isn't your thing and you're still passionate about education, there is a place for you here."

Those Who Can, Teach

"Educators in this country are getting a bad rap. We ask them to perform many roles and yet we're not supporting them as a society. Prospective teachers must student teach to become certified and are expected to not work while doing so, but there are so many people from diverse backgrounds who would love to teach—and who would be great teachers—who can't afford to do that. The Shakespeare Squared Foundation helps pay for prospective teachers to student teach. My passion is to get the right teachers in place, because that makes all the difference for students."

The Best and the Brightest

"It is definitely a challenge to find and retain the best talent, because I am up against large publishers. I have to provide a different culture and be creative in the way I offer benefits. We

really believe in the work/life balance and offer such things as flex hours, remote work capabilities, and a working-parents room in the office. We've been recognized for these efforts, and because of them, our turnover is very low."

Networking 101

"You have to go into a networking situation with the idea in mind that there will be one person in the crowd who can make a difference to you, and you have to find that person. You may be talking to someone who makes shoelaces and has nothing in common with your business, but she may know someone in your field or know about an interesting business practice that could translate to your own. But the bottom line is that if it's not the right conversation, you politely cut it short and move on."

Strength in Numbers

"There is so much value in the process of incubating an idea with other women. I am always looking for women who are coming together creatively and collaboratively because things flow from it that you would never dream. When women support other women, we empower each other to take charge of our lives, whether by owning our own businesses or making a career change or making decisions about our families."

Best Advice

"I read in Working Mother magazine that women CEOs need to take the ability that they have in their work life to delegate responsibility and create a management team and apply that to their home life as well. So I really try to think of running my household the same way I run my business; whether it's cleaning ladies or repairmen, I find people I trust and have them take care of tasks that I don't need to spend time on. This has relieved a lot of guilt and allowed me to focus on the things that are really important."

Most Rewarding Moments

"Winning the Working Mother award as one of the 25 Best Small Companies felt pretty great because it showed that having a unique workplace does pay off. But even better is realizing that your message is getting across to your people. I love seeing quotes at my team's desks about goals and achieving your dreams, all of the exact things I say to empower them. It's cool to realize that there isn't a lot of cynicism, and that people are really buying into these ideas and making them their own."

Parting Thoughts ...

- "My secret weapon is the news articles that I send to my team."
- "I will retire when I have no more dreams to accomplish."
- "I will always think of myself as a teacher."
- "My greatest strength is my enthusiasm."

This featured lady was profiled by Noelle Pechar Hale, a freelance writer living in Los Angeles.