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Savannah Davis '13

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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A Blossoming Success

Former college roommates become partners for online business.

By SAVANNAH DAVIS '13

When Erica (Moore) Nowak '96 moved back to her home state of Minnesota two years ago, she was ecstatic that her new house was just four doors down from her former IWU roommate, Kara (Rocheleau) Lazarus '95. Even though they maintained a close friendship after graduation, the excitement of being reunited quickly prompted the pair to become business partners.

Inspired by a gift, a ribbon pony that Erica made for Kara's daughter, they launched One Pink Tulip in 2009. The online boutique sells affordable, handmade items like headbands and hair bows to girls and women.

"We both work and decided to do One Pink Tulip on the side. We felt we had great products and with our education from IWU and our M.B.A.s, we knew we could make it work," says Kara.

In balancing careers, families and their new company, "it's hard trying to juggle it all," says Kara. "However, it reminds us of our time at IWU when we had schoolwork, clubs and sports and were also trying to have a fun college life. We now realize we require a little more sleep than we did in our college days."

Kara is owner and principal of the market research firm Think Pink Idea Consulting. The firm leads idea-generating exercises, moderates market research and guides team meetings for companies like General Mills, Target and Johnson & Johnson. Kara received her M.B.A. from the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. She and husband Benjamin have one daughter. Erica is married to Jeff Nowak '96 and they have three daughters. As a manager of provider contracting for HealthPartners, Erica oversees and negotiates contracts with healthcare providers. She earned her M.B.A. from Goizueta Business School at Emory University and a master's in biotechnology from Northwestern University.

One Pink Tulip requires about 10 hours of their time each week, which occurs during what Kara calls the "nine-to-midnight shift," after their kids have gone to bed. Erica creates and makes most of the products, while Kara attends more to the company's business side, including marketing. "We promote the business on Facebook and Twitter as well as local boutiques and trunk shows," says Kara. "We also rely on word of mouth and our vast network of friends."

One Pink Tulip maintains an environmentally friendly focus. For example, the business does not print invoices and also recycles shipping materials and paper cards, while 5 percent of its profits are donated to The Nature Conservancy.

Despite its growing success, Erica and Kara have no plans to turn their company into a full-time venture. "We're both so lucky to have two jobs that we love in this troubled economy," says Kara. "While we definitely want One Pink Tulip to grow as big as it can, I think we'd hire people to help us before giving up our other jobs."

"We actually love the corporate life and felt that One Pink Tulip could offer us a new perspective on business," she continues. "We both work for service companies and wanted to understand marketing and developing a product. It has been eye-opening, terrifying, an incredible challenge and one of the most rewarding things we have ever done."



Erica Nowak (left) and Kara Lazarus launched One Pink Tulip in 2009.