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**MOMTREPENEURS: SIX ORANGE COUNTY WOMEN  
ON WHAT IT TAKES TO START AND RUN A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS  
by Debra Garfinkle**

The six Orange County entrepreneurs featured here own a variety of companies, including a private equity firm, a photography studio, and an online clothing store. Some have owned their own companies for decades while others formed their first company this year. But all six women say that though they work very hard at their jobs, they love what they do and love spending time with their families.

**Natasha Nelson** has a lot of experience as a business owner. She turned a frozen yogurt store she and her sister owned into a substantial franchise, co-owns a large public relations firm, and recently bought a toy company. Her businesses have been very diverse, but have several things in common: enthusiastic customers and financial success.

Nelson has spent the majority of her career in public relations, first interning with large public relations agencies as a student at Vanguard University. After getting her degree, she worked in the PR industry fulltime, forming her own company, NN Public Relations, in 2002. Three years ago, she merged her agency with her friend and colleague Michael Caudill's agency to form DRIVEN Public Relations. DRIVEN employs 17 people in offices in Costa Mesa, Temecula, New York City, and Tempe, Arizona. It serves numerous businesses and nonprofits in a variety of fields. [www.drivenpublicrelations.com](http://www.drivenpublicrelations.com)

Nelson's career has always gone well, but she has faced tough personal challenges. One of the toughest was after her mother was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Nelson and her sister started spending a lot of time in Arizona, where their mother lived. It was very difficult to witness the hardships ALS placed on her mother, but Nelson wanted to be there for her. At the time, Nelson owned her own agency, but was able to delegate some of her management responsibilities to her employees.

While in Arizona, Nelson noticed that there were no self-serve frozen yogurt stores there. Knowing how popular they were in Orange County, Nelson and her sister thought about opening their own store in Arizona. Their mother, who had been an entrepreneur herself, was enthusiastic about the idea. The idea proved to be an excellent one, partly because building a business together helped the women keep their minds on something other than ALS. They opened Yogurtini in Arizona in 2008. It quickly became very popular. Nelson and her sister franchised

their new business, opening 35 Yogurtini stores within a few years. They sold the business to Rocky Mountain Chocolate Company in 2013.

Nelson has a great relationship with her stepchildren, ages 7 and 11. Nelson loves to spend time with them and attend their baseball games, cheerleading events, dance recitals, and other activities. One reason she has the time to do so while running her companies is that her husband helps out a lot at home.

Nelson doesn't rest on her laurels. She noticed how enthusiastic her stepson and other children were about Kauzbots, which are handmade stuffed robot toys. So this year, she invested in the Kauzbots company. Kauzbots are special in that 10 percent of the retail price of each toy goes to a charitable cause. There are ten different robots, each of which corresponds to a nonprofit organization. Children can choose a Kauzbot that helps the environment, supports refugees, helps children with cancer, or contributes to other great causes. The toys are sold in stores all over the country and at [www.Kauzbots.com](http://www.Kauzbots.com)

Nelson advises aspiring entrepreneurs to be observant about what other people are enthusiastic about and try to respond to that enthusiasm. She and her sister started Yogurtini because she recognized how much people liked self-serve frozen yogurt; she bought Kauzbots after seeing children's strong reactions to them. She also tells people with an entrepreneurial bent to resist getting stuck in a career working for others and to never stop trying. After running PR agencies, frozen yogurt stores, and toy companies, it will be interesting to see what Nelson does next.

**Twila True** has come a long way. Born to a 16-year-old mother, True was the first person in her family to graduate high school, True eventually became the president of a large company and then the owner of many other companies. True has lived all over the world and is the mother of four children, all of whom she expects to graduate from college.

True's mother grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota, leaving for California when she was pregnant with True. True learned to be very independent, as her mother struggled with alcohol addiction and poverty. True was raised mostly by her grandmother and aunts and uncles, whom True lovingly calls her "tribe."

After high school, True supported herself financially, working at a private investment company during the day and taking accounting classes at night. She says she worked "seven days a week, morning to night." She spent time in different departments of the company, such as sales, accounting, and operations, and was rewarded for her efforts with numerous promotions over the years. Eventually, she became president of a computer manufacturing company with 300 employees that was owned by private investors.

In 1998, she met her husband and moved with him to Asia to help him run and grow his furniture company. They lived in Hong Kong and China before selling their company and moving to Newport Beach in 2012. Their company was a huge success, generating a great deal of profit. They used these profits in 2012 to fund True Investments, a private equity firm. True's responsibilities include the firm's overall strategy, finances, real estate portfolio, and beauty salon investments. True recently opened a nail salon called Polished Perfect in Costa Mesa. In the next few months, True will open five more Polished Perfect salons in California, Arizona, and Texas. [www.PolishedPerfect.com](http://www.PolishedPerfect.com)

True is a dedicated philanthropist. She and her husband have established foundations to help orphaned children and residents of the Pine Ridge Indian reservation, which, True says, is the poorest reservation in the United States.

True and her husband have four children, ages two, eight, 12, and 14. They balance time with their family and their business endeavors by giving their children a lot of responsibility. Though True took on a great deal of responsibility as a child out of necessity, she believes affluent children should be given responsibilities too, in order to give them a strong sense of self-worth and independence. She expects her older children to wake themselves up in the morning and get ready for school on their own, including packing their lunches. She also has them do chores and some cooking after school.

True has great respect for mothers who don't work outside the home, but also feels that women shouldn't feel guilty about working. As a working mother, True enjoys having things to share at the dinner table that aren't always focused on her home or family. "When children see their mother's accomplishments," True says, "they can aspire to have their own." True is proud of her contributions in raising four children, but is also proud of her contributions to charity and to the business world.

**Alexia Alvear and Gina Cretikos** just started their first company on—no fooling—April 1<sup>st</sup> of this year. But the two sisters have always wanted to own a business together.

Their father, Nicholas, taught them a great deal about entrepreneurship through his own example. He owned a company that sold motorcycle apparel and accessories. Alvear and Cretikos say he and their mother, Stella, showed them something much more important than business acumen: loving support for each other and for their children. Nicholas and Stella had an "amazing relationship" lasting 40 years, until Nicholas passed away two years ago. Alvear and Cretikos still have trouble talking about their father's death. They say, through tears, that it was one of the hardest things they ever had to go through.

The family still finds great support in each other. Alvear, Cretikos, their two brothers, and mother all live in Orange County. They describe themselves as a "big, loud, Greek family."

Alvear lives in Irvine with her husband and 16-month-old daughter. Cretikos resides in Westminster with her husband and six-year-old son.

The sisters have fun together, but also share a strong work ethic. Cretikos, six years older than Alvear, has a lot of experience in management. She spent 11 years at her father's company as his assistant and, eventually, office manager. Alvear spent 15 years at Wet Seal, a girls clothing retailer that originated in Orange County. She worked her way up to become a buyer for the company.

The sisters found an ideal way to combine Cretikos's experience in business management and Alvear's experience as a buyer for an apparel company: They decided to open an online store selling children's clothing and accessories. Last December, Cretikos and Alvear quit their jobs to prepare to launch the company. They named it NICKY + STELLA, after their beloved parents. As they worked to get their business started, they felt the comforting presence of their father guiding them.

The sisters set out to create "a fun and easy shopping experience for busy moms." NICKY + STELLA is a curated site. Cretikos and Alvear search the Internet for cute, good quality, unique items to sell to their customers. They also make clothes to sell for the NICKY + STELLA brand. The website makes it simple for shoppers to order a variety of brands at one online site, with one flat rate shipping fee. A popular option on the website is "Shop the Look," in which a cute themed outfit such as "Pumpkin Princess" or "Little Bo Chic" is pictured. Customers can order the whole ensemble, from hat to shirt to pants to shoes, by clicking on the picture and choosing the sizes for their children. Though NICKY + STELLA is new, it's already popular on social media, with over 8,000 Instagram followers. [www.NickyandStella.com](http://www.NickyandStella.com)

So far, Cretikos and Alvear do everything themselves related to the business, from curating clothes and marketing their company to shipping their products. Cretikos says, "I've never been so tired and I've never had so much fun." She advises aspiring entrepreneurs, "Don't let fear hold you back. The scariest things can be the most rewarding. Close your eyes and jump. As long as you have a good support system and your business idea is feasible, go for it." Alvear echoes her sister's advice, adding: "If you believe in something and are excited by it, do it."

**Mona Shah-Anderson** fell into entrepreneurship. She had been happy working for other people, as Media Relations Director for an Orange County public relations company. But after her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2004, Shah-Anderson quit her job in order to spend more time with him. She took on a few public relations clients as a freelancer, which gave her the income and flexibility she needed. Soon it made sense to establish a company for her growing freelance business. At her father's bedside, Shah-Anderson set up her own public relations firm.

Shah-Anderson's father was an inspiration to her. An orthopedic surgeon with an MBA, he had always enjoyed taking on new challenges. Shah-Anderson has taken on many challenges herself. She has lived all over the country, spending her first decade in New York, moving to Southern California at age 10, going to school at the University of Michigan, and then returning to California. She served as Public Relations Director for the Miss Universe Organization, coordinated projects in Africa with the Harvard Aids Institute, and worked on the Academy Awards and Golden Globes shows.

Her company, Moxxe Public Relations, mainly promotes independent, chef-driven restaurants. Currently, Moxxe has two employees and two dozen clients. That suits Shah-Anderson well. Her goal is not to grow Moxxe into a big firm, but rather to run the best small firm of its type. She loves her clients, whom she considers friends and extensions of her family. Many of them came to her wedding and baby shower. She describes her clients as "good people running great restaurants," and is happy to help them get the attention they deserve. [www.MoxxePR.com](http://www.MoxxePR.com)

Shah-Anderson, who has 16-month-old twins, quips, "Every day is its own adventure." She is grateful for her husband, who has a nine-to-five job, but spends a lot of time with the twins when he's home. He gets them ready most mornings and puts them to bed most nights.

Shah-Anderson is very humble, saying, "I've made so many mistakes." But she views mistakes as valuable learning experiences and believes that the rewards of owning a business are greater than the risks. Her advice for aspiring business owners is to smart small and make sure you have a great idea for your company. "Do something you love. You should be excited about your job."

Photography has always been important to **Ana Brandt**. She believes that visual histories help people better understand their pasts and those of their families while informing them of what they may look like in the future. For a long time, Brandt treated her love of photography as a hobby. Now it is the core of her very successful business.

Brandt was adopted and never saw a photo of her birth mother or of herself as a baby. But her adoptive family took lots of pictures. Her adoptive father had emigrated from Argentina to New York; he wanted to ensure that all his relatives in Argentina could see his children as they grew up. Brandt's maternal grandmother was the family photographer. When she passed away, Brandt took over. She especially loved taking pictures of her nieces and nephews when they were babies.

But Brandt never considered photography to be anything but a hobby and never really thought of starting her own company. She studied accounting in college and took photography classes just for fun. During the decade after graduation, she worked fulltime for web design companies, but indulged her hobby by taking night classes in photography. When she was 29, her professor at a

photography night class at Golden West University told her something that changed her life: “You were born to be a professional photographer.” Brandt finally recognized that photography could be more than a hobby for her. She decided to specialize in pregnancy and newborn shots. She quit her day job and went pro.

It wasn’t easy. Brandt had just had her first child. She had recently moved with her husband from New York to California, so had no relatives here and no contacts for her prospective business. That didn’t stop Brandt. With her portfolio and her infant in tow, she set out to make contacts, going door-to-door to almost every business in Southern California that sold clothes or gear for baby or children.

She was hired to do photoshoots at a few of the stores she’d visited. She took the pictures near the store window in the hope of drawing in potential clients. Her business began to grow. A few years later, in 2003, she opened a tiny studio. By that time, she had another new baby. She equipped the studio with a playpen and other baby gear. Her business continued to grow. In 2005, she had her third baby and moved to a bigger studio in Tustin. Since 2011, she has taken the cover photos for almost every issue of this magazine. Brandt was never an overnight success; rather, her business has grown steadily stronger over the past 14 years. She has now taken pictures for over 4,500 clients.

Brandt’s photography business spawned several other successful businesses. For a long time, she had trouble finding cute diaper covers to use during her photo shoots. So she selected cute fabric and hired someone to sew diaper covers with it. She started selling diaper covers in her studio and online at [www.BellyBabyLove.com](http://www.BellyBabyLove.com). Recently, she began designing maternity gowns and other clothing to sell on the site.

Juggling the needs of her businesses with her desire to spend lots of time with her husband and three children hasn’t been easy. Brandt quips, “Sometimes I feel like I’m losing my mind.” Now that her children are older—10, 12, and 14—they are more independent. Still, there have been plenty of bumps in the road for Brandt. Six years ago, she was hospitalized after losing half of her blood and 75% of her body’s iron. In the years since, Brandt has faced many blood and iron transfusions and emergency room visits. She hasn’t received a definitive diagnosis, but doctors know that her body doesn’t absorb iron properly. Every three months, Brandt goes to the hospital for an iron transfusion.

Brandt now stresses the importance of prioritizing her health. She takes every Sunday off work to be with her family and every Monday for personal downtime. She believes this helps her entire family, stating: “Healthy children start with healthy parents.” We at ParentingOC want her to stay in great health and continue creating wonderful covers for us. [www.AnaBrandt.com](http://www.AnaBrandt.com)