

High-Tech Mama

BY JOHN THOMSON

Her morning toast was getting cold and the coffee lukewarm, but Vancouver entrepreneur and mother, heck grandmother, Sharon Bliss was transfixed. Her 27-year-old son Zach had a big idea and a big dilemma. He had designed a computer application called Shot Lister, which would revolutionize the movie industry, but he didn't have the money to develop it and take it to market.

"Like all great ideas it came out of a need to solve a problem," says Sharon.

The problem was scheduling. "After 100 years of film-making, the state of the art was a piece of paper and a red pen," says Zach dismissively.

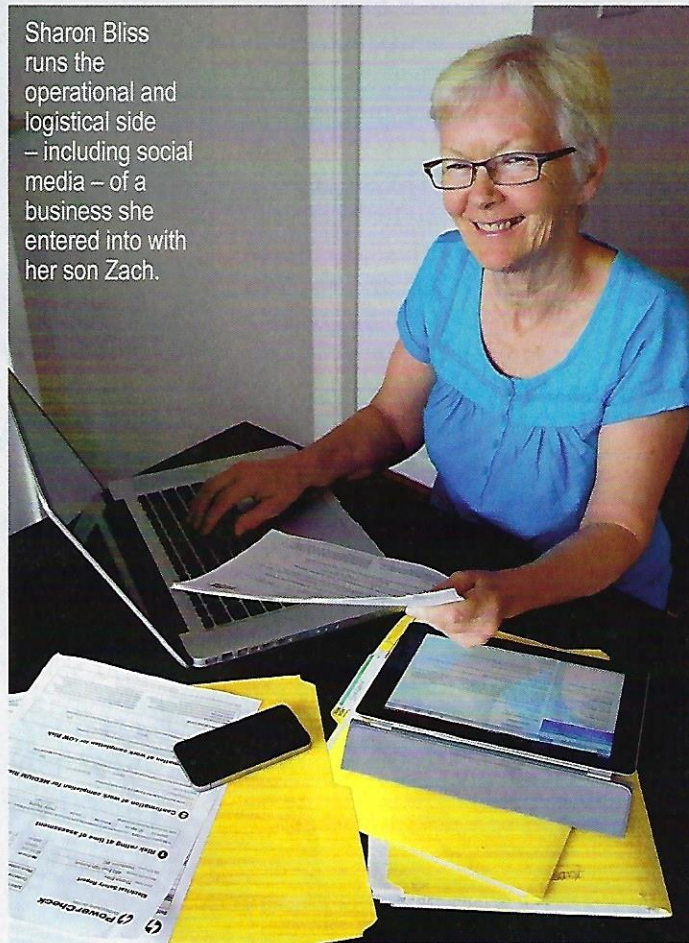
Zach had just finished directing his first TV movie, and he was frustrated by the time it took to re-jig his shot list. A shot list is a document that tells the director which scenes have to be shot in which order. If one scene is delayed or runs over schedule, the rest of the day's shoot is thrown out of whack and a new list has to be printed and distributed to the crew. That cuts into precious shooting time.

If only directors like himself, Zach reckoned, could re-shuffle their shot lists in real time and on their portable hand-held devices, production companies could save time and money.

Sharon felt Zach's pain. He was so sure of the idea's potential yet stymied for a lack of funds. What was a mother to do? Why, invest, of course.

"I said it sounds like a great idea," continues Sharon. "How much do you think it will cost? He said 'Well, prob-

Sharon Bliss runs the operational and logistical side – including social media – of a business she entered into with her son Zach.



Photos: John Thomson

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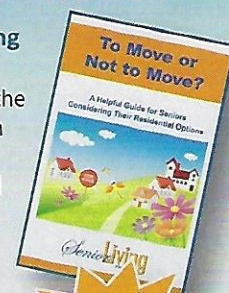
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ably \$5,000.' So I said why don't I put the money up, you do the designing, and we'll hire a software guy to write code. How hard can it be?"

Software guy Andrei Iancu of Dynamic Leap Technology Inc. answered the call.

"I work with many start-ups and I know the problem," says Andrei. "You don't have any money until you sell something; it's a Catch-22, so I gave them breaks at the beginning."


Those breaks were crucial. Not only had Sharon committed to floating the idea with \$5,000 of her own money, soon to expand beyond her original investment, but she took on marketing as well.

She went to Apple and secured a distribution deal. Apple would sell the application through its iStores for a 30 per cent commission on sales, but she would have to drive customers to the stores herself.

What did she know about marketing? Lots. What did she know about smartphones and tablets? Not so much. True, she had mastered the art of selling, first at BC's educational broadcaster Knowledge Network where, as a contract producer, she parlayed grants and commissions into television programs and, later, as an entrepreneur buying apartments, fixing them up and selling them for a profit, but this was the 21st century.

Although a technological neophyte – "I wasn't on Twitter and not that active on Facebook," – she knew the old ways of doing business wouldn't cut it with her target demographic.

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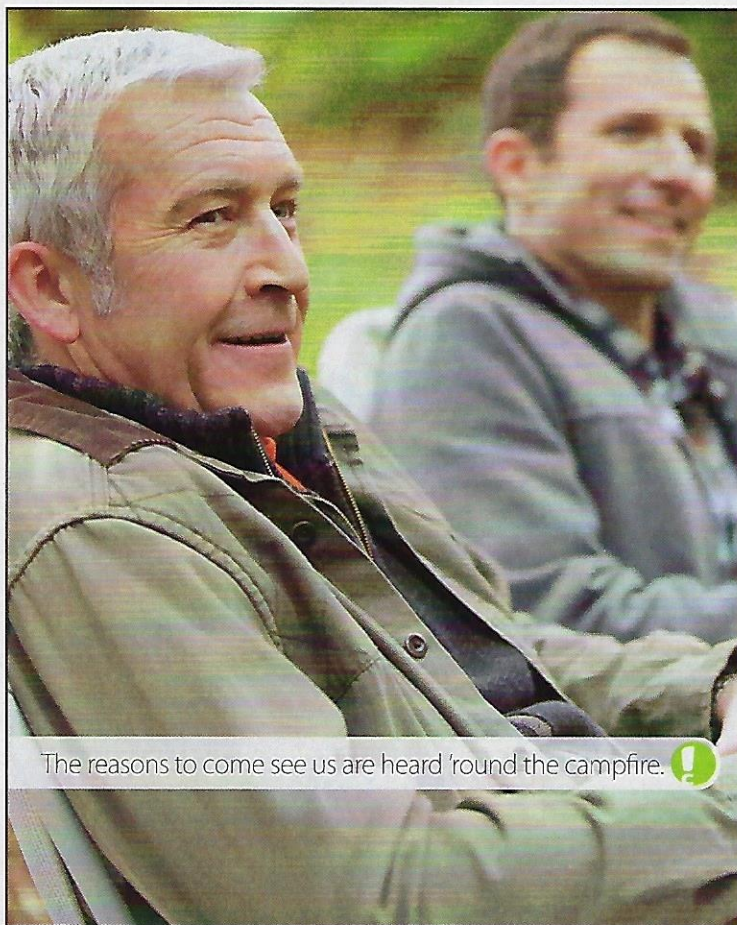
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She would have to use social media.

"I thought it would appeal to the under-30s, and I thought that was the way to reach them," she says. "They didn't read newspapers and they didn't watch television. You had to start with social media and fan out from there."

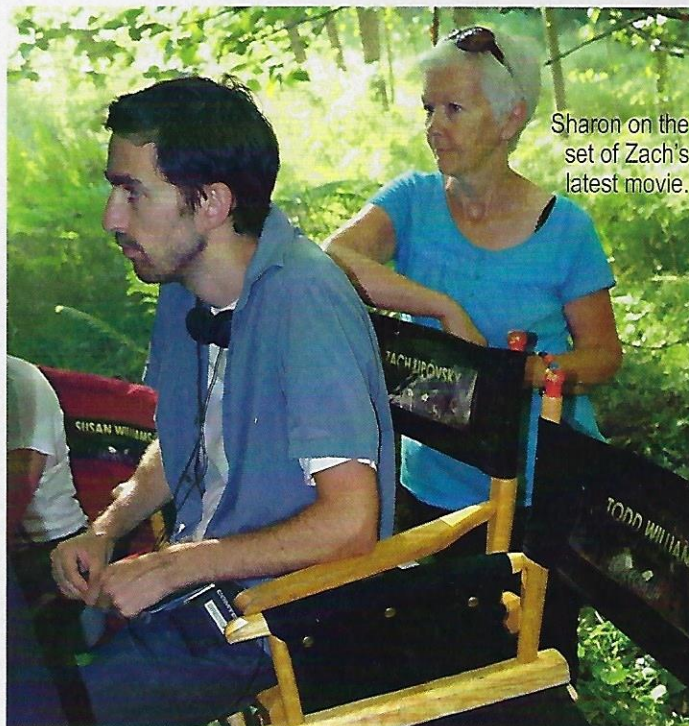
"At first she was too formal and it came off as corporate," says Zach. Undeterred, she taught herself the art of geek speak. "Now she chats with ease with people my age," her son continues.

"Shouting out how good you are in social media gets shunned," says Sharon. "What you need to do is engage with your buyers. Each day, there would be people that I'd email and it wouldn't be the old formal press release but a friendly kind of email. 'This is what I've done, this is what's happening, here's a quote from so-and-so. Are you interested in talking about it?'"

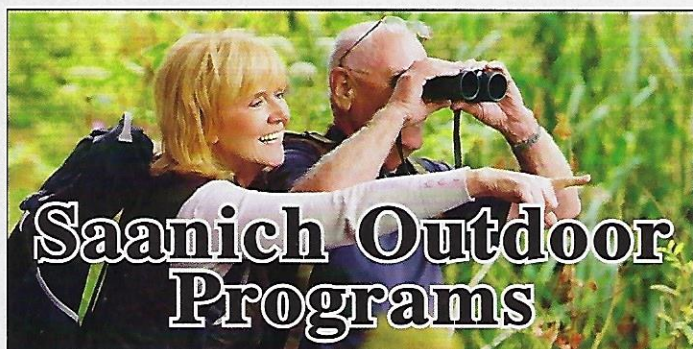
It's a multi-levelled marketing approach involving referrals, testimonials and, yes, even some old-fashioned printed materials.

One month after launching, Sharon had recouped her investment. A grant from Creative BC, formerly known as BC Film and Media, allowed the duo to refine their product. To date, approximately 6,000 units have been sold around the world.

It's a well-oiled machine. Zach is primarily based in Los Angeles and concentrates on upgrades. Sharon manages the social media desk answering queries in youth-friendly tweets.



"We split things very well; she does everything I hate," says Zach. "She runs all the business and logistical side of things, paperwork, contracts, payments, social media and marketing. I spend most of my time designing and working with the programmers. The partnership works very well be-



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"So much of life is being open," says Sharon of her new job, one of many in a long line of occupations that has demanded courage and persistence, traits she attributes to her Kiwi upbringing. Sharon immigrated to Canada in 1980.

"The new Zealand attitude is very self-reliant," she says. "You don't hire someone to build a garage; you and your friends get together and build it yourself."

The project has not only strengthened the mother-son bond – "we've always been close, it definitely keeps us in touch," says Zach – but it has also freed Sharon from conventional marketing restraints.

"Shot Lister came along at the perfect time in my life," she says. "It doesn't matter where I am. Because it's so flexible and because I plan to travel, I can be on the beach at Waikiki and be checking on sales."

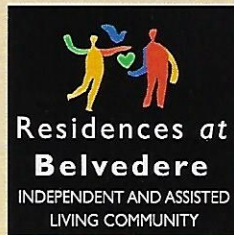
The duo has formalized their working relationship spelling out their respective roles and future profit sharing. While they now draw a small stipend from sales, they're plowing most of their money back into the company. Next up? A new version of Shot Lister that will play on the Android operating system. That would lead to servicing more tablets and smartphones, a job that Sharon would gladly tackle from that familiar beach in Waikiki. **SL**

To see a video of Sharon on the set of Zach's latest movie, visit www.seniorlivingmag.com/sharonbliss



Life Begins Here

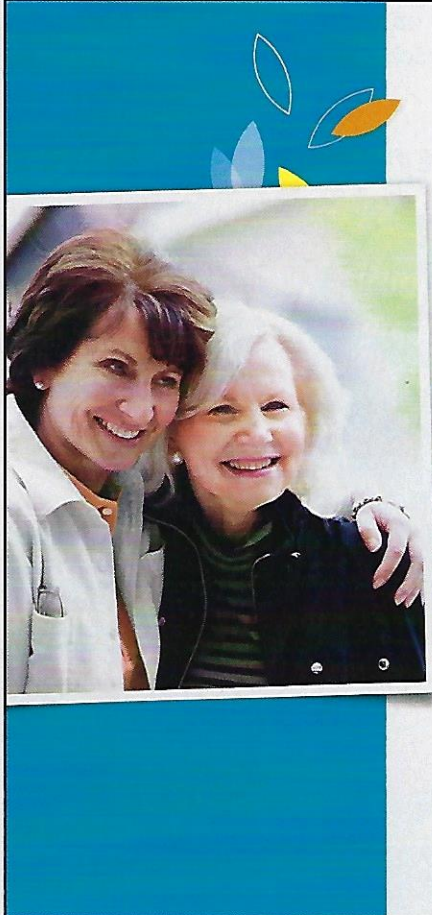
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