

NEIGHBORS

Walking on air

Dog bed business lands woman on entrepreneur DVD

BY SHARON DARGAY
O&E STAFF WRITER

Julie King found a niche in dog beds.

"Use what you've got. Be smart about it. Use two covers and don't cheap it out. Make it the best, most easy thing that will last the longest," she said, sharing the philosophy behind her Gertie Gear air beds for dogs.

The Westland woman didn't plan to make and sell a new product when she began her search for an easy-to-clean, sustainable bed two years ago. She simply was tired of doing laundry generated by her potty-challenged pooch, Gertie, a senior Beagle with back problems and "an attitude" about piddling indoors.

"I bought one of every kind. I've gone through two dozen beds. The foam beds you can't wash. If you wash the stuffing beds they take days to dry. It's like washing a pillow," said King, who also owns a Beagle-Shepherd mix, Jackie, 8, and a cat, Veto, 16. She supplied multiple beds for Gertie, who promptly urinated on them.

"I noticed when I bought a bed with a pillow in the middle, she nests. I wondered how can I come up with something like that? It ended up being an air bed."

She bought two different brands at first. One quickly sustained a hole. The other had such a small zipper opening that King struggled to

pull the inflated tube in and out of its protective covering.

DO-IT-YOURSELF

King, 39, had created a carpeted ramp for Gertie and figured she also could custom make a bed. She'd start with a doughnut-shaped inflatable pool toy, encase it in a canvass covering with a wide-zippered opening and top it all off with a colorful, soft fabric that would slip over the entire bed like a fitted sheet.

A few sewing lessons later from one of her four siblings, King assembled the bed and tested it on Gertie.

"She loved it."

So did dog owners who saw her handiwork.

Their interest compelled King to create Gertie Gear and begin making the beds herself. A Center for Creative Studies graduate, King had worked with branding, creative graphics, design, marketing at several firms in the Detroit area before creating Greenworld Creative LLC, her own creative services agency. The work from Greenworld helped her pay bills while launching Gertie Gear in March 2008 and getting ready to sell her product for the first time at a street fair in Ferndale two months later.

It was a rocky start. Her father, who had struggled with esophageal cancer during the prior six months, died just three days before the fair. King barely slept between the fair and her father's funeral, the



Gertie and Julie King are a dynamic duo.



Julie King sews a covering for her Gertie Gear dog bed.

day before, but managed to break even on the show.

NETWORKING, SELLING

Later that summer she began promoting her work

on Etsy.com, a Web site for artisans. She joined Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and networked with other individuals selling dog-related products. By the following summer she

resumed selling at dog shows, craft fairs and farmers' markets.

Her work caught the eye of a "swag bag" supplier for West Coast events that draw celebrity dog lovers. She supplied beds and vouchers for beds for Earthday in Hollywood and HOLLYWOOF last year. That led to a call from Jai Rodriguez, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* star, who expressed interest in

the product.

The American Kennel Club featured Gertie Gear in its holiday gift guide last year and invited it back for this year's spring-summer guide.

Fido Friendly magazine listed Gertie Gear among its top 100 products this year and Detroit Public TV included King's story in a special project, StartupNation — Open for Business with the Sloan Brothers. The television special aired last week on Channel 56. King's story is told on a "special features" section of the show's DVD, which will be released this summer.

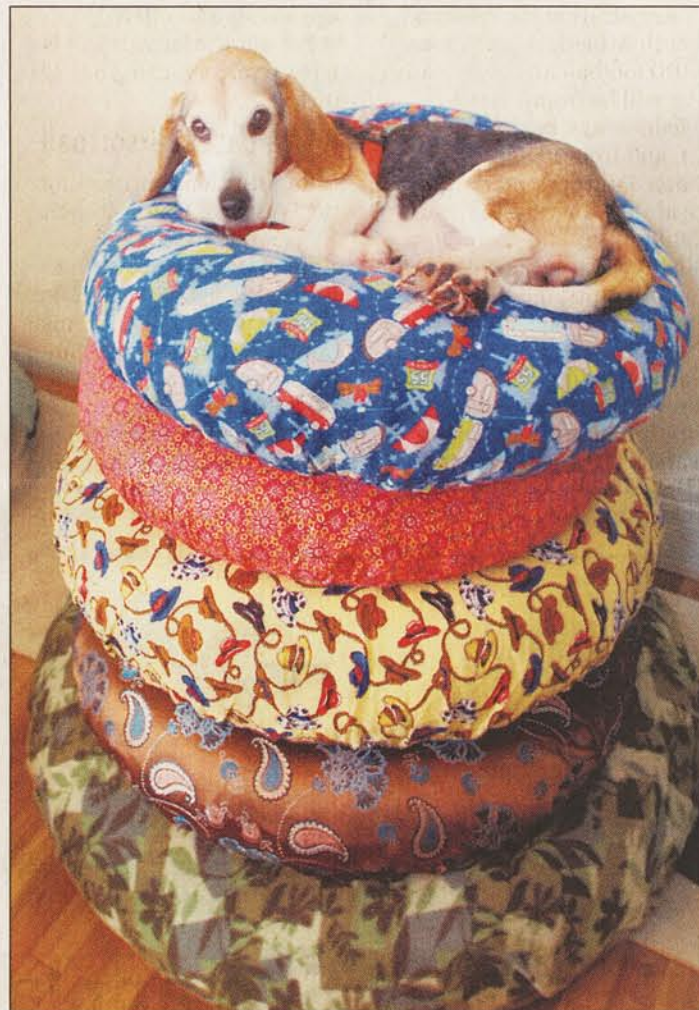
"I've been so lucky. I've gotten so many breaks, but one thing led to another," she said.

Her best advice for budding entrepreneurs is "use your resources."

"I'm not talking about asking your parents or friends for money. I'm talking about their knowledge. Everybody knows something. Everybody is willing to give a little bit of information."

Gertie Gear dog air beds come in three sizes and cost \$55, \$65 and \$110. The zippered canvas covering is nail- and claw-proof. The slipcovers are made of various fabrics in prints and solids.

All covers are machine wash/dry and the tube never compresses nor holds odors or allergens. They are orthopedic, portable and leave a minimal eco-footprint.



Gertie lounges on a stack of Gertie Gear airbeds.

Specializing in Residential & Commercial Restoration
& Custom Brick Work

Dan's Custom Brickwork

882 York St. • Plymouth, MI 48170



Chimneys & Porches Repaired
and Rebuilt

Tuck Pointing & All Other Brick Work

Natural & Cultured Stone Installation

1.734.416.5425

Free Estimates

Licensed and Insured

OE08652890

Arthritis Today

JOSEPH J. WEISS, M.D. RHEUMATOLOGY

18829 Farmington Road

Livonia, Michigan 48152

Phone: (248) 478-7860



INFORMATION

Usually, what doctors need most from a patient is information. What is the reason that the patient made the appointment? What data does the patient bring that bears on the matter at hand? Does the patient have notes that detail what made pain come on and how the patient tried to stop the discomfort. Are there recent laboratory tests, x-rays, CT scans or MRIs that other physicians ordered? If the patient came because the doctor wanted a second opinion, is there a letter or notes that describe the other doctor's thinking and what question the other doctor wanted answered?

It is not sufficient at the time of an appointment to say: "Just call the other doctor's office, and get what you want?" Fax machines, phones, and even E-mail are everywhere, but the office asking for the information depends on someone to be at the other end of the line who is willing and able to get the information. The chart that holds the reports may be misplaced, or the office person who handles such requests may be at lunch.

The best way to provide the doctor with information is for the patient to have it in hand and bring it to the doctor at the time of the appointment. Computer entry, Internet storage, a chip embedded in the patient's insurance card will never replace the patient with information on paper for the doctor to review. Any electronic communication is subject to breakdown, glitches and problems of compatibility.

Doctors, now and for the foreseeable future, are experienced in reading words and taking notes.

driweiss.yourmd.com

OE08693060