

# DIVIDENDS

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## Profiles

Profiles of  
success:  
Great ideas,  
better ways,  
innovations  
and quality  
come to life.

### Making Her Pointe

**I**N A FIELD NOT KNOWN FOR progressive thinking, Eliza Gaynor Minden found a way to revolutionize ballet's most essential tool. She recently completed the first major redesign of pointe shoes in 160 years.

Minden rejects the notion that the pain experienced by ballerinas (the only dancers required to concentrate all their weight on the tips of their toes) is necessarily inherent to the art form.

Applying the same technology that has revolutionized athletic shoes, Minden, a Yale graduate and amateur ballet dancer, came up with a shock absorbent pointe shoe that wins rave reviews from dancers and doctors alike.

"It has always bothered me that dancers are not given the recognition they deserve for being elite athletes," says Minden, who founded her New York-based company, Gaynor-Minden, in 1993 after eight years of research and development. "All sorts of provisions are made for the podiatric foot and ankle health of major athletes, but almost none have been made for the dancer."

Minden's shoe replaces the layers of hardened cardboard and glue used to make other pointe shoes with an elastomeric (a high-strength, flexible polymer) shank surrounded by an impact-absorbing layer of cellular urethane foam. On the outside, Minden managed to keep the pink satin shoe looking as delicate as ever.

The shoes, which Minden says last three to five times longer than traditional slippers, retail for about \$70—some \$20 more than the average pointe shoe.

The transition from researching and testing the shoe to actually selling it hap-

"One day we had a whole class of young dancers trying to cram into our apartment to be fitted for shoes, and we realized that it was time to go into business," Minden says. But like any good dancer, each of Minden's steps have been cautious and deliberate.

"We wanted to avoid the classic small-business mistake of growing too fast," she says of her company, which has sales of about \$1 million. "We wanted to provide a certain quality of service and didn't want to expand the business until we were certain we could provide that."

Minden's husband, John, who serves as chief executive, maintains an elaborate database that includes a record of each customer's injuries and foot problems. Sales people inquire about these conditions before selling the dancer another pair of shoes.

It's that kind of concern for the customer that drives Gaynor-Minden, which now sells shoes in every major U.S. market as well as overseas. Given the fierce loyalty of professional dancers for a particular brand of shoe (so far only a few dancers from top companies like the Kirov, Joffrey, and Dance Theatre of Harlem are converts), Minden's marketing targets younger dancers.

In the future, Minden plans to develop other types of high-tech dance shoes. "I only want to make shoes that are better than the ones already being made, using different materials," she says. "I want to be innovative."