

PARADISE

Three successful entrepreneurs followed their hearts to start businesses in fields in which they had long-standing personal interests. Here's how they did it:

They Weren't Afraid To Take A Chance

BY JOAN WILEN AND LYDIA WILEN

"IT STRUCK ME AS OUTRAGEOUS that dancers should be expected to perform artistic and athletic miracles in shoes made from flimsy materials," says Eliza Gaynor Minden, who started her own small business to manufacture and sell the Pointe Shoe, her redesign of the traditional ballet shoe. "Because dancers are artists, no one paid attention to their physical needs as athletes."

As a young girl, Minden was introduced to the world of dance as a student in her mother's ballet school in Southport, Conn. She knew she wanted to do something in the performing arts but not as a performer. After graduating from Yale with a liberal arts degree, she worked for three years as the manager and administrator of dance companies. Minden says that's where she learned that 80 percent of professional dancers suffer ankle injuries that could be prevented with more protective shoes.

"I was bold enough to think I could successfully improve the traditional pointe shoe – for several reasons," says

Eliza Gaynor Minden displays her redesigned version of a traditional ballet shoe. "Because dancers are artists," she says, "no one paid attention to their physical needs as athletes."



For her redesigned pointe shoe, Eliza Gaynor Minden sought information from several sources. "I talked with a ski-boot designer, a sail-maker, an engineer and a plastics specialist."

Minden, 39, who lives in New York City. "I knew the dancer's side from my own experience as an amateur. My family's energy-efficient lighting business made me familiar with blueprints, prototyping and the process of applying for a patent. And my liberal arts education taught me how to teach myself."

Minden consulted dancers and ballet teachers about her new shoe design, but she also sought information from unrelated sources. "I talked with a ski-boot designer about foam, a sail-maker about thread, an engineer about the physics of the toe box, and plastics specialists about materials." Now, after just five years, her wholesale and mail-order business has 20 employees. It grossed more than \$1 million in sales last year.