

Inspiration for young women

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Gabrielle Melchionda, owner of the Maine company Mad Gabs, spoke at a business conference for young girls Saturday in Waterville.

FAIRFIELD -- Gabrielle Melchionda never dreamed she would grow up to run a successful business that sells natural cosmetics featured in "Vogue" and other major magazines.

As a child she hated math and flunked the subject in high school -- swearing she would never have a career that required she use math.

Now, many years later, she loves numbers and uses math every day in her job as president of her business Mad Gabs, located in an historic mill in Westbrook.

"It's definitely a wild ride and for the most part, I love my job," Melchionda said.

She was speaking Saturday before more than 50 girls in grades 5 through 8 who gathered for the ninth annual Girls Unlimited! Conference, hosted by

Hardy Girls Healthy Women and Zoey's Room, and held at Kennebec Valley Community College.

The conference's theme this year was "Biz Whiz: Be Miz Independent," in keeping with Hardy Girls' goal of helping girls defy media stereotypes, become agents of change and grow into independent and confident women.

Melchionda, 36, of Yarmouth, stumbled on a recipe for lip balm years ago while attending the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She was re-taking a math class she had flunked and decided to do something fun at the same time, so she took a massage class, she said.

The teacher brought a book to class about how to make natural cosmetics and Melchionda wrote down the recipe for lip balm, got some bees wax from a neighbor who kept bees, bought oils at a store and started making lip balm.

What was supposed to be a hobby turned into a success story as she started selling the balm to stores in town.

"By the spring of my senior year, I was selling in 20 to 25 stores," she said. "It was mostly natural food stores."

After graduation, she got into a business incubator, which helped her to organize, focus on financials and, ultimately, hone her skills as a businesswoman and expand her product.

When the television show QVC came to Maine looking for Maine companies to feature, Mad Gabs and 20 others were chosen. Business boomed from the exposure and she was asked to return to the show.

"Vogue" magazine called and before she knew it, she was featured in 32 magazines in two months. They included "Seventeen," "Modern Bride" and "Elle."

Speaking rapidly and with verve, Melchionda explained how she named her company, which employs five people.

"As you can tell, I have the gift of gab," she said, to laughter from the audience. Asked about her company's name, which uses a short form of her first name, she said it came about as the result of a "fluke."

"I had these little labels and I had to have something that fit on them." she said. "It was just a whim. It was just really random."

Now married and the mother of two, Melchionda says owning one's own business is great, but also a challenge.

The things she likes most are that two days are never the same, she has control over her destiny, she gets to pick her own staff, has flexibility with her children and is allowed to be creative.

The bad things: the job never ends, there is always financial risk to the business, there can be a lot of pressure and one must often juggle home and work -- such as during the past week in which her children were sick, the power went out, a snowstorm hit and snow days resulted.

Last year, a flood ruined the inventory, computers and furniture in her company and she had to basically start over.

"Nobody can tell me how to fix it -- I have to figure it out myself," she said.

In 1997, Melchionda was given the Small Business Administration's Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award. She also been recipient of the Maine Business for Social Responsibility Eagle Feather Award. She ships her products, including hand balm and other items, to companies all over the world.

Jackie Dupont, programs coordinator for Hardy Girls and Saturday's project coordinator, said the girls who attended the conference came from all over Maine, as well as Massachusetts.

The event, which included workshops and lunch, was sponsored by Key Bank -- Achieve anything; the New Girls Fund for Social Change; and the Maine Office of Substance Abuse.

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