

Tot Trade Founder Puts Family First

by Anne Marie Greene, 2020 Contributor

Ask Kelly Graybill “do you work?” and her initial answer is always, “no, I’m a stay at home mom.”

Her husband, Bob, will then gently remind her of her little business. “Oh, yeah, I do this sale called Tot Trade.”

Kelly Graybill is founder and the singular driving force behind Tot Trade, South Carolina’s largest consignment sale. Begun in 1997 with just 36 participating consignors and a few hundred shoppers, Tot Trade has grown to a semi-annual 9-day event that attracts nearly 1,000 consignors and 4,000 shoppers.

Kelly grew up the only girl, and the middle child, in a family of 5 children in the northwest corner of Alabama. With no aspirations to attend college, she always knew her ultimate goal was to be a wife and a mom. However, with a natural ability for retail sales and management, Kelly worked with cosmetics company Estee’ Lauder for 4 years before going to work for mega-retailer The Gap. Throughout her successful 10-year career with The Gap, she was promoted and trained for upper management. The Gap moved her to Savannah, Ga., where she met and married her husband, Bob Graybill.

Bob and Kelly moved to Columbia and Kelly continued working for The Gap until their first child was born.

ness, a business where she would remain in control of the things that are important to her: her time, her focus, her family. She read numerous books about

fact, no one thought it would work...except my mother. My mom told me, “If you believe in it, it will work.”

Her first sale in the spring of 1997



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starting your own business and gleaned from them two important rules: do something you know and do something

was a bare bones, one-man show. “I did it all,” says Kelly. She pounded the pavement passing out flyers by hand, made copies at her husband’s office, received a mailing list from a friend with a direct mail company in Pennsylvania, and persuaded the facility manager at Jamil Temple to rent her the building for her “little sale.” “He thought I was crazy,” she adds. That first year she was able to pay the bills. Nothing more.

However, in the 8 years since, her “little sale” has mushroomed into one of the most anticipated events of the year. Her mailing list tops 9,000 and the sale has expanded from the original 3-day weekend to a 9-day shopping event. A virtual Mecca for families seeking affordable items ranging from baby equipment to clothing to toys, moms from throughout South Carolina schedule vacations and family activities so that they do not miss Tot Trade.

Kelly loves to tell how a few years ago she suggested to her husband that he bring Cameron and Colin to Tot Trade to get a first-hand look. Bob and the boys arrived at Jamil Temple and there was not a single parking spot to be found. As they drove through the parking lot, they were amazed to see a line of shoppers stretching out the door and around the

and giving advice to other moms about how to start a similar consignment sale business. Realizing that the demand, as well as the need, was there for Tot Trades in other cities, and wanting to protect the integrity of her business plan and her name, Kelly has made Tot Trade available to others via franchising. “I’m re-working the way franchising is handled because Tot Trade is unique,” Kelly states. “I want to make it affordable to mommies like me. I want to help and benefit families.” In the last year, Tot Trades have been held in Charlotte and also in Los Angeles. She is currently working through 85 franchise applications from throughout the country.

The tremendous success of Tot Trade has been a blessing to her family in many ways. Extremely modest about anything to do with actual sales volumes or income, Kelly prefers to talk about the blessings she and her family have received. “God knows where my heart is and I know that this is all a blessing from him. Tot Trade has opened opportunities for my family to participate in and support things that are close to our hearts. Giving to our church building fund, supporting a college student through Campus Crusade for Christ, making anonymous donations to people in need. These are things we are able to do because of Tot Trade.”

Kelly’s love of giving and helping others is an important component of Tot Trade. Since the very beginning, any items that remain when the sale is finished are given to at least 5 different charities. Organizations that have immediate needs, such as crisis pregnancy outreach DayBreak Ministries, are invited to come and take whatever they need to fill their closets. Other charities that have benefited from Kelly’s generosity are Shriners’s Burn Hospital, Children’s Garden, Prevent Child Abuse, and Children’s Chance. In addition to established organizations, individual families, including one family who had just lost everything in a fire, come and shop for clothes, toys, and household items.

With a true entrepreneurial spirit, Kelly is not content to just sit back and enjoy her success. “The vice-president at The Gap took me aside one day and told me that the old maxim ‘if it ain’t broken, don’t fix it’ just doesn’t work if you want to stay ahead. He told me that a better motto is ‘if it ain’t broken, break it.’ And that’s the way I am. I’m never happy or comfortable that things can’t be better. I’m always tossing out plans that didn’t work and adding new ideas.”

Each Tot Trade has been different, as Kelly has added vendors, the Mommy Mart, pre-sale days, discount days, and lots and lots of volunteers. This September she’ll introduce a whole new phase of Tot Trade – Tot Trade Too – a second full sale right on the heels of the first,

designed to attract consignors and shoppers from other parts of the Midlands. In addition to growing and tweaking Tot Trade, Kelly adds with a twinkle in her eye, “oh, and I have a business plan written for a whole new idea.”



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Devoted to her goal of being a stay-at-home mom, Kelly left her great career – and the comfort of dual incomes – to focus her time and energy on raising two boys: Cameron, now 11 years old, and Colin, 7.

Although Kelly felt happy and blessed fulfilling her dream of being a wife and mom, she yearned to contribute to her family’s income. She also realized that she missed the challenge and competition working had provided.

“I’m a mother first and foremost,” is a refrain that Kelly repeats often. Wanting to remain true to her commitment to her family, Kelly decided to pursue the idea of starting her own busi-

ness.

Kelly says, “I know retail management. It doesn’t scare me to do the things it requires such as managing 60-plus people, setting a floor, customer service. And I love children and families and I knew I wanted to do something that would benefit mommies like me.”

Friends in Alabama had started a consignment sale and Kelly realized the idea, with a little tweaking, could work in Columbia. For a year and a half Kelly worked on her plan, playing through every scenario. She knew she had a great idea. But her friends and family didn’t think so. “Not one person said ‘that’s a great idea,’” Kelly recalls. “In

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...how to shop

...how to consign

...how to volunteer

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building. Looking at the spectacle, young Cameron remarked with awe, “Daddy, my mommy’s a genius.”

As word about Tot Trade began to spread, Kelly was spending more and more time answering questions from