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One couple, two businesses

At 28, entrepreneurs plan finances, growth carefully

By Paula Schleis
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To Noelle and Tim Beck, entrepreneurship means less about making a buck and more about making a life.

In 2004, the devout Akron couple quit their full-time jobs, hoping to find a way to pay the bills while doing the unpaid missionary work that defines who they are.

He started a small business: a seasonal venture that keeps them busy in the warm months.

She started a nonprofit: an evening program for teens that really picks up in the winter.

And although they haven't completely recovered from the stress of putting together two enterprises in five months, the 28-year-olds say their gamble is paying off.

``When we dated in college, we said we wanted to live ultimately for Christ and not hold on to much," Noelle said.

After graduating, they started married life rather traditionally.

His mechanical engineering degree at the University of Akron started paying off with a troubleshooting job at Aircraft Braking Systems.

She put her Bible theology education from Malone College to work as a youth minister with The Chapel.

The proverbial knock of opportunity came in early 2004, when someone who rented inflatable attractions for events at The Chapel was looking to get out of the business.

``He said he had seven kids and wanted to spend more time with them, and the business was taking up all of his evenings and weekends," Tim said.

The Becks ended up buying the assets of the business and tried to run it while juggling their other jobs.

Every spare moment was spent researching and filing the necessary documents to start a business and contacting customers to explain the change of ownership.

And, of course, evenings and weekends were consumed with driving to, setting up, manning and taking down rock walls, obstacle courses and inflatable slides at parties, proms and picnics all over Ohio.

``It was so incredibly crazy," Tim said. ``I couldn't possibly do both jobs at the same time. There was an extreme amount of stress in our lives, and I had to decide to do one or the other."

Tim spent a couple of weeks soul-searching. Noelle wondered why it took him so long.

``I kept telling him to quit (the engineering job). I thought if the last guy raised seven kids on it, it would be enough for us," she said. ``Plus, I felt Tim really needed to be his own boss."

Meanwhile, Noelle was making her own move.

The Chapel had been running a program for Kenmore-area teens called First Glance, a safe hangout above a storefront along Kenmore Boulevard, where kids could socialize, play games and learn about faith if they wished.

``We don't hit them over the head with a Bible. We're not aggressive like that," Noelle said. ``We try to connect students through Christ by providing loving and nonthreatening activities."

With the blessing of church officials, Noelle separated First Glance into its own 501(c)3 nonprofit, then quit her job at The Chapel to become First Glance's unpaid director.

Tim is also devoted to the year-round program, and because demand for Solid Rock Sports declines after October, he can spend more time volunteering at First Glance in its busiest winter months.

Each November, the couple take financial stock. With little income expected until business picks up again in April, they have to plan carefully for the lean months.

``I always worry," Tim acknowledged. ``But we've always made it. God's always taken care of us."

Solid Rock Sports is growing and even added its first regular employee. And Tim hopes to market a Web-based software program he created for the business's Web site.

But the Becks appear even more focused on growing First Glance. Once a biweekly gathering, as many as 200 students now attend several events each week, including a meeting for teen mothers and a session for skateboarders.

With no room in their small rented space left for expansion, they've begun a fundraising effort to raise \$1 million to move First Glance into a bigger, permanent home.

``It's been a lot of work. A *lot* of work," Tim said, looking back at how the couple reshaped their lives.

But the lesson has been obvious, as they always knew it would be: ``Money isn't happiness," he said. ``I'd trade time for money any day."

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About First Glance

Visit **firstglance.org** for more about activities available to Kenmore area youth for ages from sixth grade through high school.

About Solid Rock Sports

Visit www.solidrocksports.net for photos and details on rentable attractions, including inflatable slides, rock walls and obstacle courses.

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Mike Cardew/Akron Beacon Journal

Tim Beck takes a turn on the skateboard ramp at the the Beck's Ministry First Glance on Kenmore Boulevard Thursday Nov. 9, 2006 in Akron, Ohio.

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David Foster /Akron Beacon Journal

John Stubblefield, left, and Anthony Aglioti of Solid Rock Sports set up large inflatables at the Berlin Christian Fellowship on Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2006, in Berlin, Ohio. Stubblefield has worked for Tim and Noelle Beck since they started the company.