



## For Megan



ALANA ELLIOTT

I signed up for everything **Community Futures** offered because I had no business background. Not only was **Community Futures** immensely helpful with business mentorship, they provided a loan for a packaging machine that greatly accelerated our production capacity and company growth.

### Nonuttin' Food's Allergy-Friendly Products Success Lies in their Customer's Deepest Fears and Hopes: Safe Food

For Nonuttin' Foods Founder and President Alana Elliott, the reason for starting her company was deeply personal: her daughter could die.

"When Megan was a baby she would spit out peanut butter," Alana says. "Her face would swell and she would get hives. Luckily, she never ingested it." Alana discovered the hard way that her daughter has a potentially fatal allergy to peanuts. Megan's allergy list has since expanded to include almonds, kiwi, and chickpeas. She now wears an epinephrine autoinjector—commonly called an "epi-pen," it contains epinephrine that can counteract the effects of acute allergic reactions—on her waist at all times.

"We would go to the grocery store and read every ingredient on product labels," Alana says. "Even things we thought were safe had small print that said 'may contain traces of...' and so-called nut-free schools still had kids bringing granola bars with 'may contain' products. It's Russian roulette and I wasn't prepared to do that with my daughter's life."

Out of fear and frustration, a company was born—and with it, the first allergy-friendly granola bar on the market.

Getting Nonuttin' granola bars into grocery stores was a crash course in entrepreneurship with an extremely steep learning curve for the mom with no food-business experience. Prior to starting home-based production in 2004, Alana spent two years developing recipes and working with the University of British Columbia on shelf life. She also tapped into **Community Futures** wealth of resources for new entrepreneurs and took, "everything **Community Futures** offered to learn as much as possible about business."

"Naivety was a good thing," Alana says. "I just thought if I worked hard, I could overcome it all." Alana says her belief in life-long learning helped. "I had to ask questions. I had to admit what I didn't know and learn it."

Even after the initial start-up, Alana's learning curve stayed high.

Take the example of a new packaging machine dubbed “Bertha.” Alana likens Bertha’s first day of operation to the I Love Lucy episode where Lucy had to start eating the chocolates to keep up with the speed of the machine. But Bertha was worth it. The machine transitioned the company from hand-packaged to machine-packaged product, which accelerated production exponentially.

Today, Nonuttin’ Foods produces 13 different products, including 2,000 granola bars per day, that are free of 10 out of 11 top food allergens, kosher, genetically modified organism (GMO) free, and that meet the needs of celiacs and vegans. The company has three employees, and their kids can be found helping with packaging when time permits. When he’s not away at his full-time job, Alana’s husband Rob can be found fine-tuning and fixing equipment.

Like most successful companies, keeping a sharp focus on customer needs has been crucial to Nonuttin’s growth. Starting with three kinds of granola bars in 2004, Nonuttin’ Foods has responded to customer suggestions by expanding its offering to include nut-free granolas, trail mixes, baking ingredients, and fruit. In 2007, Nonuttin’ introduced wheat-, rye- and barley-free products for celiac disease. Next up: products suitable for people with diabetes.

“We have people come to our trade booths and cry because we offer the only product their child can take to school that looks and feels normal,” Alana says. “It’s a big responsibility to work to make the lives of others easier.”

Expansion has not come without hurdles, including two product recalls in 2007 that were caused by a supplier problem with rancid oats. The spoiled ingredients didn’t affect customer health or safety, but affected taste. “We stopped all production for three months,” Alana says. “We almost lost the business because of it.”

Alana’s hard work, perseverance and commitment to doing the right thing are paying off. One of Nonuttin’ Food’s first clients was the prestigious Toronto Hospital for Sick Kids, and the company has been covered by the likes of the Wall Street Journal. Nonuttin’ Foods also filled a significant order from the Olympic broadcasting centres in Vancouver and Whistler.

When asked about future plans, Alana responds with a laugh, “Does taking over the world sound doable?” According to the entrepreneur, opportunities are being created by the demand for gluten-free and dairy-free foods—global demand that is growing by 300 per cent every year. At home, Health Canada estimates that 90,000 Canadian children are allergic to peanuts and 1.1 million Canadians have food allergies, a market that Nonuttin’ Foods has just begun to tap even with its success.

The driving force to take advantage of those growth opportunities is as powerful as the reason for Nonuttin’s inception. “This is for Megan,” Alana says. “It keeps me passionate about the future of the company.”

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