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## MINDING YOUR BUSINESS

### Parents turned educational entrepreneurs see needs and fill them

#### Chicago public schools use Shenanigans Series, which features two African-American kids in relatable plotlines

By Ann Meyer

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Jil Ross' entrepreneurial foray into creating a series of fiction books aimed at African-American youths grew out of a mother's frustration.

"I couldn't find chapter books that featured African-American children anywhere," said the Beverly mother of two teenagers who has taken a leave from her career in customer service for United Airlines to develop and market The Shenanigans Series of books, which was launched five years ago. "I found books on slavery and history, but nothing from current day."

The Shenanigans Series is now being used in about 10 Chicago public schools and is sold online at Target.com, Borders.com, Amazon.com and bn.com, the Barnes & Noble Web site, she said. Ross hopes to branch out to Catholic schools and to other geographic areas, she said.

"There is a great demand out there for relevant literature for various grade levels to read," said Agnes Crawford, assistant executive director of the professional development unit for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in Alexandria, Va.

"This is an area that particularly inner-city [schools] seem to be interested in," Crawford said.

Ross has on her side demographic trends that show the nation's school enrollment, now at about 55 million students in kindergarten through grade 12, is projected to continue growing through 2014, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Still, tapping that market is a challenge, she said. "The creativity is there. My kids have given me all the stories. The marketing has been the hard part," she said, noting that she earns about \$6.25 for each of her newest books sold and has sold 800 books.



Ross created the series partly to inspire her son, who was a late reader. She kept a journal of her children's everyday escapades, then started writing and marketing books about an African-American brother-and-sister pair named Foster and Marie Blake.

Ross' ability to recognize a need in the marketplace and come up with a way to fill it is key to successful entrepreneurship, experts said.

"They look in the market to see what is going on. They see a significant hole and nobody filling the hole, and they go ahead and fill it," said business consultant Philippe Lavie, a partner at the Chicago office of Melcion Chassagne and Cie.

#### Parent turned entrepreneur

Lavie is advising another parent-turned-educational entrepreneur, Thomas Morrow, who is chairman and chief executive at Home School Inc., a Des Plaines-based online company that launched its first product, an online management tool for planning, educating and recording home-schoolers' performance, in January 2007.

Morrow, a former Fortune 500 executive, became interested in home-schooling because one of his children has learning disabilities and needed more individual instruction, he said.

He and all but one of the company's 11 full-time and four part-time workers home-school their children, he said. They are part of the third wave of home-schooling parents, "those who home-educate their children to receive a superior outcome" academically, he said. About 60 percent of families who use Home School Inc.'s <http://www.home-school-inc.com> fit in that category, with the remaining 40 percent home-schooling for religious reasons, Morrow said.

Home School has raised \$2.8 million from friends and family so far, and its management is in talks with a Chicago venture-capital firm, Morrow said.

Meantime, the company's business model has expanded from subscription fees and advertising revenue to sales from multimedia curriculum, online tutoring and an online legal service geared toward the million-plus families who home-school. Morrow is projecting 2008 revenue of about \$4 million, up from less than \$100,000 in 2007.

"Historically, what parents are willing to pay money for is curriculum and instruction and field trips," Morrow said.

The company is banking on a wide market for Virtual Field Trip, a multimedia offering it is creating, as well as Art Academy Alive, developed in partnership with an affiliate company. But development fees are substantial, he said.

Creating a new multimedia program can cost \$60,000 to \$200,000, compared with roughly \$30,000 to \$60,000 for a science or math textbook. Still, Morrow said, "the quality of the experience is so much higher." For example, Art Academy Alive will show artists in action, demonstrating techniques, he said.

"There is definitely room for new ideas," said Crawford, of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

It's not just home-school teachers who appreciate new ways for engaging children. While public schools must abide by state curriculum requirements, teachers are always looking for interesting ways to teach

the material.

"Teachers don't have the time to develop all of these things themselves," Crawford said. "They are constantly looking for what's new and available and will interest their students."

Writer and publisher

In Chicago, Ross is working on her sixth book in The Shenanigans Series, with hopes of motivating more students to read for pleasure. But a big part of her job is marketing the books, published under the Cedar Hill Publishing label, which is essentially a "self-publisher" that offers a marketing tool kit along with light editing and page formatting.

"Jil is really working her buns off to market these books to educational institutions," said Becky Hayes, owner of Cedar Hill Publishing in Show Low, Ariz. "She's more determined than the average [author]. She is really focused on this."

To add an instructional element to her chapter books, Ross provides a vocabulary list of challenging words in the front of the book and discussion questions at the end. Many of the anecdotes in the books are based on the experiences of Ross' children.

"The kids who read her books relate to what the stories are about," Hayes said.

What's more, Ross provides a moral in every story. The message is: "You learn from the mistakes you make," Ross said.

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