

Mom's superhero capes take off

By Parija Kavalanz @CNNMoney May 9, 2014: 10:59 AM ET

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PHOTO: SUPERFLY KIDS

Eight years ago, Holly Bartman made superhero capes for her son's birthday. Now, she has a \$2.4 million company.

16

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NEW YORK (CNNMoney)

Holly Bartman was like millions of women: A stay-at-home mom with a crafty streak and a son who loved superheroes

But that was all it took to hatch a million-dollar startup idea.

"My son really wanted a superhero party for his fourth birthday," said Bartman. "But he wanted to be his own character."

So Bartman, a former special ed teacher, got to work.

"I thought I could make some fun capes for Owen and his friends," she said.

She bought satin fabric in a variety of colors and stitched about a dozen capes, costing about \$5-\$6 apiece. The verdict? "Owen loved his cape," she said, especially because she'd modeled it after his favorite Cartoon Networks character "Ben 10."

And it wasn't just Owen. Several of his friend's moms implored Bartman to start selling them.

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A few months after her son's party, she did just that. Bartman started making generic kids' superhero capes with emblems like a star or lightning bolt and selling them online. As orders picked up, she offered customizable capes with kids' initials.

Three years later in 2009, she was making about 1,000 capes a month out of her home in Farmington, Mich. She hired part-time help but still couldn't keep up with demand. She eventually outgrew her house and rented a nearby office space.

It was a fortuitous move. There, she met Justin Draplin, who ran his own marketing firm in the building.

"My first thought was, 'Can you really make money making these capes? Who'd want one?'" he said. He got his answer after some quick research.

"Kids under the age of 7 love superheroes, and there are 20 million kids in that age group in America," he said. "That was her target market."

So in 2010, Bartman and Draplin became business partners and co-owners of Superfly Kids.

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What started as a "side business to get just a little extra cash," today is a profitable, debt-free company with 17 employees and \$2.4 million in revenue last year.

The company manufactured 100,000 capes from its Livonia, Mich., facility in 2013. 95% of the orders are for customized capes.

Draplin sold his marketing firm a year and a half ago to focus fully on the business side of Superfly Kids. Bartman continues to drive its creative and product strategy.

Their next goal is to get the capes into stores like Wal-Mart (**WMT, Fortune 500**), Target (**TGT, Fortune 500**) and Toys R Us.

Bartman is also working to add more products to the Superfly Kids brand. In addition to capes, the company now sells T-shirts, masks, belts, plush toys and tutus for girls. The products sell from anywhere between \$5 to \$75. And none feature any licensed characters or logos.



"Our products aren't necessarily cheaper than licensed products but they allow kids to be more imaginative," said Draplin. "When kids wear Superman or Batman capes, they become that one character. But our generic designs let them explore what it means to be a superhero."

What happens if *gasp* kids get bored of superhero capes?

"I don't see that happening," said Bartman. "My dad wore a towel attached by a clothespin around his neck. I wore capes, and my kids are now wearing capes. That's three generations right there. Superhero capes are staying."

Even though Owen, now 12, outgrew the superhero phase, her daughter Lilliane, 9, was right on his heels.

"I probably made more capes for her than for Owen," said Bartman.

Both are proud fans of the business.

"It's funny to hear the kids brag to their friends about their mom making superhero capes," she said. "Lilliane is already talking about wanting to take over the business." ■

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