

An Interview with Abby Brennan, Owner of Brennan Spa | Work Life Mom

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One of my many goals with the Work | **Life** | Mom series is to show a variety of mom-owned businesses, including those that have a real, live storefront. So when I started to think about who I could reach out to, I immediately thought of some of my favorite local businesses in the Chicago western suburbs. [Brennan Spa](#) in Brookfield, owned by mom-of-two Abby Brennan, is one of those businesses.



Abby Brennan
Owner, Brennan Massage & Spa

Brennan

Massage and Spa has been open for seven years and is housed in a beautiful 100-year-old home near other shops and restaurants in downtown Brookfield. The upstairs rooms are used for spa treatments, including massages, facials, cranialsacrals, waxing, and more. I have tried several of their services and always have an amazing experience — in fact, after leaving the city and struggling to find a place where I could get a great massage, Brennan's Spa filled that suburban void for me, and in an adorable space to boot. I was thrilled when Abby — a former art teacher who is warm, funny, creative, and engaging — agreed to be featured as part of the [Work | Life | Mom series](#) on Mommy Sanest.

LOU: TELL US ABOUT YOUR FAMILY.

Abby: My husband is the stay-at-home parent. He also helps at the spa with behind the scenes stuff, like some phone calls, coordinating, and repairs. He's in charge of the plumber, the carpenter, anybody we have to hire to actually do work, and then he makes sure it happens. He's home with Harriet, our 3 1/2-year-old who is in preschool part time, five days a week. And then we have Iris who is 10 months.

HOW DID YOU GO FROM BEING AN ART TEACHER TO SPA OWNER?

I was a fine arts teacher at a Chicago Public School. It was mostly classroom management, but we got a lot of artwork done — I figured how to make that happen. I was there for seven years. Emotionally, it was poison, and even though I could positively get through the day, I wanted to make a change. After three years, I started to job hunt, but being an art teacher, there was just nothing. I realized, unless I stay here and become the crabbiest teacher in the world, I knew I was going to be making a career change.

I remember thinking, what would be the most natural thing for me to do; what would be something that would make me really happy? I tried to reflect on what I enjoyed doing as a child because I feel like at that time, you're connected to what brings you pure joy. This is crazy, but playing in the dirt brought me and my bother and sister lots of joy. So I thought I would be extremely happy doing something with gardening or anthropology. But when I thought more about it, I realized that would mean going back to college, and there was no way I would go back to college.

My second idea was about these dreams I used to have. I had them every night for years; they probably didn't stop until I was in high school. My dreams were of these glowing hands, and they would go through everybody in my family's body and heal them. I never even told people about that until I realized why I opened up the business. I remember thinking about energy and healing, so something with Reiki or healing touch. But I was worried about whether or not that would be a sufficient income, so I thought, I can move into energy work, but I'll start with massage. So I signed up for massage school and just kept going. And now Brennan Spa has been in business for seven years.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE PROCESS OF OPENING BRENNAN SPA?

I finished massage school, and it was time to look for a space. I had worked at a few spas and for a physical therapist, so I had two years of experience in the industry. I knew I wanted my own space, and I always envisioned owning a business in a home.

I was living in Chicago, but I didn't want to open a business in the city — I don't want to compete with that. So I drove to all these neighborhoods during my school spring break. I just spent a week exploring and looking for either a rental or an opportunity to buy.

Brookfield was the last place I looked. I was driving down Grand Blvd., and I saw this for sale sign falling out of the bushes, so I jumped out of the car and thought, "If this is zoned for a business, I'll buy it," before I even walked in the door. I called the realtor and asked, "What is this zone?" and she said, "Mixed use."

I had to get the business code changed, which took six months. I had to make presentations to the Village of Brookfield and get the community to vote for whether I could just do massage. They said, "If you want to open up a hair salon you can do massage in the back," but it's against code to just do massage because the code was written in the 1940s. The village was all for it, but I had to go through the formality of changing the code. So the minute they changed it, I called the realtor and started bidding on the house.

The whole time, I'm teaching and in business classes through the Hull House. The Hull House was a not-for-profit that had free classes on everything, but they also had a solid business course for eight weeks taught by a professional. That's how I created my business plan. [Note from Lou: The Hull House closed in 2012.]

So, I bought the spa in May 2007. As soon as I got the keys, we started the work. I did a little work while school was still going and then worked the whole summer. My husband and I got married in August 2007, and Brennan Spa opened January 2, 2008.

I was still teaching then, but the spa didn't open until 4pm during the week. I would teach all morning, then I would put the pedal to metal and fly out here to open the spa. I'd stay until 9, then I would wake up and go teach again. I did that until the end of the school year 2008. At that point, I thought, "I can make this work," so I quit teaching.



MOST SMALL BUSINESSES NEED TIME TO TURN A PROFIT. IN ADDITION TO TEACHING THE FIRST YEAR THE BUSINESS WAS OPEN, HOW ELSE DID YOU PLAN FOR THE UNCERTAINTIES OF OPENING A BUSINESS?

We were really budgeted — that's why I kept teaching that first year, so we had income. But I think we did everything just right with the spa. We started slowly and small. We only used the first floor. When I quit my job, we rented out our house, and we lived here. So we lived upstairs for two years to see if we could make any money.

HOW DID YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND DECIDE THAT HE WOULD BE THE STAY-AT-HOME PARENT?

He was a landscape architect and when the economy tanked, his boss closed their company in 2010. Then, when our oldest daughter was a year and a half, he got a job working for another big architecture firm. We had heard unpleasant things about the work environment, but we thought, maybe he could take it. But it was terrible and making him sick. We decided that he should just leave, stay home with Harriet, and we'll figure it out. And it's been fine.

HOW DO YOU AND YOUR PARTNER BALANCE HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT WITH YOUR BUSINESS?

Right now, I don't think there's any balance. It's just trying to get through. I make sure things keep going at the spa. And then he does everything at home. I do put together the grocery list, but he does all the laundry, all the cleaning, all the cooking. If I can, I do it too. I don't have a problem doing it. It's just normally I don't have time.

HOW MANY HOURS A WEEK DO YOU WORK?

Our receptionist is here about 20 hours a week, so I'm here the other 45 hours that we're open. But it goes beyond just that — it doesn't end at 45. There's events and after-hours planning. Sometimes I have to sneak away just so I can think. My marketing intern and I are headed to the library because I can get a lot more work done there. So all in all, with my staff's help, I'm up to about 55 hours a week.

HOW DID YOU HANDLE TAKING A MATERNITY LEAVE?

With Harriet, I was able to take a good nine months off because I had two people running the spa. I had a lot of time to be with Harriet when she was little, but then it shifted so I needed to get back in full time. Since then, it's just been full time, overtime, double-time, quadruple-time. When Iris was born, my receptionist had left, so I was definitely on 80 hours a week. It was crazy. That's why sometimes I look at Iris, and I'm like, "You're pretty cute, but I don't know how we got here."

ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE DOING, AND HOW DOES THE REALITY OF OWNING BRENNAN SPA FIT WITH THE PICTURE YOU HAD IN YOUR MIND WHEN YOU WERE SITTING IN YOUR APARTMENT CONTEMPLATING YOUR PATH 10 YEARS AGO?

It totally works. I feel blessed that I paid attention to, I guess what you would consider pure joy, and making that work as a career. People don't get that luxury, or they don't realize that that could be an option — thinking back to what they loved as a kid. I feel completely satisfied. I'll probably be doing this the next 30 years until I retire, as long as I can keep it going. But I've also figured out that, in the future, if I need to downsize and make it work as a smaller business that would be fine. I don't have an interest in too much expansion. I don't want to be too big because I want to keep things under my guidance.

PART OF TAKING ON ALL THE RESPONSIBILITY OF A SMALL BUSINESS OWNER IS LOVING WHAT YOU DO, BUT YOU ALSO HAVE TO BE BUSINESS-MINDED. DO YOU FEEL LIKE THOSE TWO THINGS ARE EVER IN OPPOSITION?

Luckily for me, I feel like some of that came naturally. I learned a lot about being business-minded by running a classroom. People ask me all the time, "Did you take business classes; did you take marketing classes?" No. The business classes I took were at the Hull House and then, running a classroom. I think being fair and professional — a teaching career will ingrain that into you. I always want things to feel really positive around here with my staff. I think they feel that way. We have a lot of fun, and I don't let the small things really stress me out. There are tweaks

here and there that we have to make so that we continue to do our best work. I always make an extra effort to be professional, but we can still have fun and be goofy. I have a friendly relationship with my team and with customers, but there are boundaries.

HOW DID BECOMING A MOM CHANGED YOUR AMBITION OR HOW YOU WORK?

It's definitely made me more protective of my time because I don't get to see my kids as much, so that has become a priority. The time that I'm at the spa, I try to manage it the best I can so that I don't have to bring work home. If I'm working I work, if I'm playing, I play. It's also made me want to work harder, and those boundaries with customers, that's a bit more important to me because family is what matters first.

IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT YOUR CURRENT SITUATION TO PROVIDE YOUR FAMILY WITH MORE BALANCE, WHAT WOULD BE IT BE?

Where we're at right now, things are really good, at home and here, minus not seeing them as much as I would like, but I have to work, so there's no way around it. I keep trying to force my husband to hire a babysitter. He needs a babysitter at the house every once in awhile. So today is a Wednesday, so I'm here from 9:30am to 9pm, so he should have a babysitter come and help him. He needs a break.

AS A MOM TO TWO GIRLS, HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU IS THE EXAMPLE YOUR SETTING AS A BUSINESS OWNER?

It is important to me. Suze Orman, the personal finance adviser, said something that stuck with me. It was, "Don't whine and complain about going to work in front of your kids, it's going to make them think that work is a bad thing." So even if you don't like your job, you don't voice that in front of your kids because whatever their experience could be, you want them to feel like working is a positive thing. Your kids want to see mommy loving her job. So even though it's hard, I do say, "Mommy loves to work, I have to go." I keep the attitude that somebody has to do it, and I like working.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR MOMS WHO WANT TO START BUSINESSES?

Get a babysitter or childcare because starting a business is like having two full-time jobs. Once you're up and running, you can create more of a balance with your time. But to open a business and you're a mom, you've got to hire a babysitter. You have to be like, I have that person for three hours, so for three hours, I'm working solid, there are no breaks. You also need willpower and motivation. I know that seems mundane. You have to take it seriously, and you have to make it professional. If you need a designer get a designer; if you need a realtor get a realtor. Get your paperwork and finances in a row, and don't cut any corners. It's never worth taking the easy way out.

A big thank you to Abby Brennan of [Brennan Spa](#) for giving us a glimpse into her busy life as a small business owner and mom to two young girls. If you're in the Chicago-area, check out their website, sign up for their [mailing list](#), and like their [Facebook page](#) so you don't miss any of their great monthly promotions or sales.