

Business 2.0

Instead of climbing the corporate ladder, four 20-somethings decide to go their own routes

by Joel Samberg
Photos by Brian Ambrose



Young entrepreneurs
Nick Unsworth, Jolina Li,
Kate Sirignano and
Caitlin Thayer



Nick Unsworth's company provides social media content and training to companies hoping to improve market branding.

Courtesy of Nick Unsworth

It's too bad that college students can't automatically have 40 years of experience by the time they graduate. So many of them have interesting ideas, loads of ambition, and even an entrepreneurial spirit – yet lack the practical skills and valuable connections most people need to start a business that can flourish.

Then again, some of them don't necessarily need all those things to be successful, and we found a few: four local 20-somethings who, by virtue of their ages and the success of their own businesses, put a new spin on entrepreneurship.

Jolina Li and Nick Unsworth went to the University of Connecticut to study finance. Kate Sirignano and Caitlin Thayer attended Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts – Kate as a political science and business management student, and Caitlin as an American history major.

As many business pundits observe, success often means a willingness to take risks, and despite a lack of skills or connections, the best time to take risks is when we're young. These four took the risks, and beyond being entrepreneurs at an age when many people are still deciding what to be when they grow up, they share several additional traits, such as the passion to succeed, the self-discipline to see their ideas through – and friends and relatives who at first thought they were nuts.



Nick Unsworth's father hated his job. So Nick became a social media entrepreneur in a decisive move never to hate his.

"My dad worked for a large commercial building company, and in addition to not liking it, he was never able to attend my football games or wrestling matches," says the 29-year-old founder and president of NUMedia 2.0 (nickunsworth.com). "So I've always had a burning desire to be an entrepreneur, just so that I could have a freer kind of lifestyle."

It wasn't the only motivation, but it definitely played a part. It happens that Nick was born with the entrepreneurial spirit; he had a paper route at the age of six, picked tobacco at 14, and was self-employed by 19. "It's in my DNA," he contends.

NUMedia 2.0 provides social media content and training to companies hoping to improve market branding. It started as a one-on-one consultation service and rapidly grew to include group coaching and program development, one of the most intriguing of which is



Kate Sirignano provides a range of services that include media planning, public relations, web site development, advertising and grand opening events.

Courtesy of Kate Sirignano

a 17-module course called 'Facebook Mastering Summit,' which provides business owners with step-by-step instruction on how to acquire new customers using Facebook. NUMedia, which already passed the half-million mark in corporate revenue, has more than \$1 million in pending contracts.

"There is a never-ending appetite for training on social media marketing," says Nick, who employs two assistants. The West Hartford-based enterprise is entirely virtual, with clients all over the world.

He tried a dozen other business ventures before he hit what he calls his grand slam. "Some entrepreneurs hit it within their first three at-bats. My friends and family were telling me to get a regular job because I was approaching 30, working like mad, and had no assets. But I had a burning desire to prove people wrong."

Nick has had many burning desires. And they've fired his success.



Kate Sirignano. When you ask about her image, she'll smile and say, "I'm independent, a little brash and a little bossy." Then she'll quickly add, "But at the end of the day, I know how to get the job done."

If you look at the accomplishments of her five-year-old

marketing, communications, public relations and event planning company, you'd have to agree – at least with the part about getting things done. When it comes to image management, the 27-year-old has the expertise that many people twice her age would crave.

"In the past, friends always seemed to ask for my advice on how to present themselves and how to meet their business and marketing objectives," Kate says. So she took the cue and, with the help of her husband Erick, founded Image Marketing Consultants (imagemarketingconsultants.com) in 2007, when she was just 23 years old.

With a client list that includes William B. Meyer, Lex Products, Haier America, Osh Kosh B'gosh and Standard & Poors, it was obviously a good cue to take.

"An entrepreneur is someone who believes in what they can accomplish," Kate says. "And once you catch the entrepreneurial bug, you can't get rid of it."

Which is why what began as a one-on-one consulting service quickly evolved into a full service agency, headquartered in Plantsville, providing media planning; grand opening events for stores, restaurants and corporations; website development; public relations; and advertising.

When Kate decided to launch IMC, she knew the risks, having read statistics of all the small businesses that fail within the

Kate Sirignano



Jolina Li



Jolina Li launched a successful photo booth company.

Courtesy of Jolina Li

first few years. "But I put those fears aside. I'm proud of being a young entrepreneur. What my team and I may lack in actual years on the job, we more than make up for in passion and eagerness."

Once in a while, a visiting prospect will ask to speak to her boss. Kate – who knows image and how to use it to her advantage – simply retorts: "Sorry. You're stuck with me. I'm the boss." And if that's not enough, she just shows them the company's portfolio.



Jolina Li wanted to be a pediatrician. To her, that seemed to be a profession that would allow her to be entrepreneurial because she could set up her office and practice any way she'd like. Quite a difference, the 22-year-old now says, from the often arduous, rigid business model of her parents' Chinese restaurant, where she spent a lot of her youth.

One day, during her freshman year in college, she read an inspiring article in *Inc. Magazine* about entrepreneurship. Suddenly she realized that the best way to lead an entrepreneurial lifestyle was to be a true entrepreneur. So she took a course in it and immediately put some of her skills to practice by opening an online clothing

shop, with the help of a friend.

"It failed. It was not well thought out. It did not have a target market, pricing was too high, and the website was unprofessional," says Jolina, who subsequently launched a successful photo booth company called Oh Capture This (ohcapturethis.com).

"To become an entrepreneur you must be willing to challenge yourself. And you have to be passionate enough to stay passionate – even when at first you fail. You have to learn from mistakes."

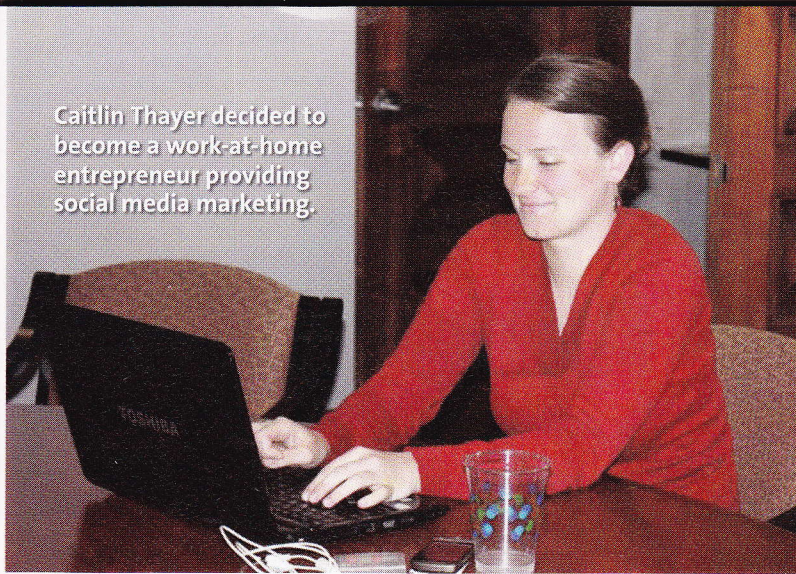
Oh Capture This rents digital photo booths for weddings, birthday parties, bar and bat mitzvahs and corporate functions. It's an old idea with a fresh twist: the technology allows for the selection of more than 300,000 backgrounds, offering a fun and meaningful way for partygoers to remember the event. What's more, the digital technology outputs a product that can be kept as a photograph for albums or wallets, or peeled to be used as a sticker.

"It adds a whole new level of fun to any event," Jolina says.

At an age when most young people are just starting to wonder how to look for a job, Jolina was booking events for her Farmington-based business – and she now has her marketing sights set on all of New England.

"When you're a young entrepreneur, many people are

Caitlin Thayer decided to become a work-at-home entrepreneur providing social media marketing.



Courtesy of Caitlin Thayer

willing to help, though there are also plenty who stare at a young face and decide there's no way you can run a business." But with passion and determination, Jolina can stare right back – while continuing to book events.



Caitlin Thayer may have decided to become a work-at-home entrepreneur because she doesn't like to wear shoes. Or maybe it's because she used to get so many calls from people asking how to kick off their social media marketing.

Probably both.

But the fact remains that it wasn't in her original game plan. "I never in a million years thought I would be an entrepreneur," the 26-year-old says today. "I always planned to work in a museum – preferably a woman's history museum – and stay in the nonprofit world."

That's where her career began, handling social media for the Mark Twain House & Museum, and she was enormously successful doing it. Then the calls began.

"I started to realize that there were a lot of groups struggling to get started with social media – and because of my passion both for nonprofits and social media, I wanted to help."

She founded Thayer Consulting as a part-time project in 2009 while still working at the muse-

um. After six months, it became clear that the project was taking on a life of its own, so she turned the consulting business into a full-time entrepreneurial enterprise, based in West Hartford.

"I also changed the name to Barefoot Media because I wanted something that better suited my personality. Barefoot running is a big part of my life," says Caitlin, whose clients now include the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, the Hartford Marathon Foundation, the Hartford Public Library and others. "Plus, I'm pretty down to earth. I live in jeans and bare feet or barefoot shoes. At first, I struggled with having to dress up for client meetings. It just wasn't me. I want potential clients to get to know the real Caitlin. So while I'll probably never wear jeans to a meeting, I'll probably wear my barefoot shoes."

Filling a need for nonprofits (she also has several for-profit clients) and doing it with skill and passion are among the entrepreneurial building blocks – and Caitlin, despite her age, learned how to use them well.

"My friends think it's awesome that I make my own schedule and work from home. My family, while nervous at first, is proud of what I've accomplished. And my clients tell me they're happy they found me." With or without shoes. **HM**



Caitlin Thayer

