

Your communities

In every shopkeeper, there's a story, and booklet tells it

By **Rachana Rathi**
GLOBE STAFF

His passion for showing people how to see and think in new ways led David Leschinsky on a journey from being a traveling computer consultant to owning a puzzle shop. For Peter Meyer, opening a cafe in Newton was the fulfillment of a running joke he and his wife shared while frequenting New York coffee shops years ago. And Tony Dopazo followed in his parents' footsteps by opening his own company, a small-business computer consultancy firm, in his childhood neighborhood.

These independent business owners are sharing their stories and entrepreneurial spirit in a booklet called *Indie Owned*. They're doing it under the premise that consumers who know the names and faces behind the storefronts are more likely to venture inside and shop, as well as possibly pay a premium at a business owned by a neighbor rather than shopping for a discount at a faceless national chain.

"It gives people a connection to the people and families running businesses and offering services in their community," said Leschinsky, owner of Eureka Puzzles in Brookline.

"They feel better about shopping here because they know it's not simply a clone of Wal-Mart or Target or Toys "R" Us."

It's precisely why Debbie Thompson of Brookline created *Indie Owned*. Her first effort offered detailed looks at more than 100 independently owned businesses in Brookline.

Now she is ready to distribute a version of *Indie Owned* covering Newton businesses and nonprofits operations, and is making plans to branch out into other suburbs west of Boston.

An attorney on maternity leave, Thompson got the idea in September when her mother's helper, Hannah Leschinsky, 14, shared how her father opened his store in pursuit of his passion for games and puzzles. A mother of three children under the age of 5, Thompson had shopped at the store for two years but knew nothing about the family who ran it.

"Learning how involved Hannah, her sisters, and mother are in the business, and that it fulfilled her fa-



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

'It's a way to build community, and at the same time, it's a way to build business.'

DEBBIE THOMPSON (center) of Brookline, creator of *Indie Owned*, meeting with David Leschinsky of Eureka Puzzles and Judy Korzenowski of Think Residential Realty

ther's dream, made it a totally different shopping experience for me," Thompson said. "Small businesses are driven by word-of-mouth. It's about the accessibility and commitment of the owner."

"I thought I can't be the only one who would really like to know this story and the stories of other business owners," she said.

Three months later, Thompson mailed a nearly 70-page, glossy directory of 110 independently owned businesses to every homeowner in Brookline. Every quarter-page of the directory offers a photo-

graph and up to 250 words of insight and background into the local entrepreneurs, who ranged from personal chefs to karate instructors.

"It's a way to build community, and at the same time it's a way to build business," said Thompson, who doesn't have plans to go back to her career as a lawyer.

Instead, she is gearing up to publish more than 30,000 copies of a similar directory for Newton, and mail one to every homeowner in the city this spring. She has set March 31 as the deadline for new entries.

Thompson also intends to publish a directory later this year for area communities, such as Weston, Wayland, Natick, Framingham, Needham, Lincoln, Sudbury, Lexington, and Dover.

Several Newton business owners, such as Meyer, said the \$250 fee for a personalized profile and pictures seems well worth the investment. The costs of marketing, along with rents and competition from chains, are increasing.

"People love that the owner is at the shop, making their drink, and that our kids are in school or Little League together," said Meyer, who has two sons, ages 5 and 7, and spent more than a decade in hotel management before opening Lincoln Street Coffee in Newton Highlands three years ago.

When Meyer read through the Brookline booklet that Thompson had dropped off at his shop, he could see how the book serves as a bridge between owners and consumers.

Dopazo, owner of Metro Tech Services, said it's particularly true for people without storefronts.

"The hardest thing about sales is the cold call where you don't know anything about the client and they don't know anything about you. Anything that can soften that, even an introduction from someone, goes a long way," said Dopazo, whose profile in the Brookline directory tells the story of how his immigrant parents met in the city, as well as his own childhood there.

"What's unique about *Indie Owned* is that when potential clients began to call me, it was immediately a friendly relationship because they knew a little bit about me," he said. "It not only broke the ice, but it made it very comfortable to do business."

The other benefit, business owners said, is that the booklet showed them the similarities between themselves and other people who set out to fill a niche and do something on their own. Meyer likened a recent gathering at his coffee shop of other local business owners who are participating in *Indie Owned*, including Dopazo and Leschinsky, to "a support group."

"It's nice meeting other people who understand what it's like to be head dishwasher, head plumber, and head maitre d'," he said. "You see what you're doing is not so crazy."