

## Peddling petals

Local flower business owner tries out a new subscription-based selling model



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Staff Reporter

Walking into Sarah von Pollaro's sleek modern kitchen in Columbia Heights, it is hard to miss the three bunches of purple Oronoco mums standing watch on her tabletop. Each vase bears a label: Water. Bleach and sugar. Commercial flower food.

It's an experiment, von Pollaro explains. She is trying to determine which substance keeps fresh flowers going longest.

That trial is part of a larger experiment von Pollaro has concocted with the July launch of Petals for the People, an extension of her D.C.-based floral design company Urban Petals LLC.

Von Pollaro and her husband, Sam, a certified financial analyst, hope to create a new, constant revenue stream by capitalizing on a mash-up of people's natural passion for fresh flowers and the growing popularity of Community Supported Agriculture.

For \$25 a week, subscribers get bundles of fresh flowers. They can pick them up at designated locations (similar to the CSA model) or have them delivered for an additional \$10.

Von Pollaro assembles the bundles of seasonal flowers and greens. The package includes flower education (such as the results of the current experiment) and design suggestions, such

as how to make one large arrangement or how to break out the bundle into smaller arrangements that can be used in multiple rooms or offices.

The flower industry is less than rosy these days. The number of retail florist shops dropped by 14 percent from 2002 to 2007, according to the Society of American Florists in Alexandria. The number of shops today is roughly the same as it was 30 years ago. Sales are down by more than 5 percent.

Urban Petals' revenue has experienced a dip too. This year is projected to be down by 11 to 12 percent from 2008 because of fewer corporate events, tighter budgets and a sabbatical the couple took in the first quarter.

This is not the first time Sarah von Pollaro has branched out into innovative areas of the floral business.

The Yale University graduate with a history degree has been designing arrangements for brides and offices since founding Urban Petals in 2004.

It wasn't an easy start. Von Pollaro apprenticed with two New York designers in the summer of 1999, but the ego-driven world of high-end floral design steered her away from the flower industry. She tried jobs in urban planning and with a children's nonprofit.

However, flowers remained a passion, and von Pollaro finally gave in, during what turned out to be a difficult year in her life. She had just broken up

with a serious boyfriend and suddenly found herself with no place to live and no car. Von Pollaro bootstrapped her way through those first corporate deliveries, borrowing friends' cars and arranging flowers in the trunks, a sort of "drive-by florist," she says with a laugh.

Eventually the business took off, thanks to a serendipitous meeting with a Washington Post reporter intrigued by Von Pollaro's idea to host flower design parties in homes. The only problem? The parties were more concept than reality at the time. Von Pollaro quickly got them in motion, and they became a core element of her business.

The idea for Petals for the People "really stemmed from doing those flower parties," von Pollaro says. Guests, inspired by their newly acquired design skills, kept asking her where they should buy flowers locally, and she didn't have a good answer.

Where there's a need, there's a business opportunity, von Pollaro mused.

She doesn't expect the new line to draw in her larger corporate clients, who might spend up to \$100 or more a week and expect completed arrangements designed specifically for their offices.

"But maybe a small dentist's office, where they like flowers at the front desk, and the secretary's been going to Whole Foods," von Pollaro says. "And now they're like 'Oh, for actually the same or less I can get something better

that lasts."

The idea required a lot of pruning. After playing around with different models, from retail shop to regular delivery service, von Pollaro hit upon the CSA concept, which eliminated the costs and logistical headaches of delivery. She and Sam polled clients and friends with a simple Web survey. They learned that people would be interested in a subscription if they could stop and start at any time and that \$25 seemed to be the magic number.

The startup numbers are small. Just five to six people were scheduled for the first pickup July 16. The company is now up to about 40 subscriptions. But the initial costs were also low. Von Pollaro laid out about \$1,500 for promotions and a launch party.

She only buys the flowers she needs for that week. Sam estimates that next year Petals for the People's revenue will equal that of the traditional floral design business.

For Sarah, it's about more than the revenue stream. She vividly recalls the look on a friend's face when she presented one of her first bridal bouquets and the smiles at her flower parties.

"People are so happy, and they feel so good about themselves and what they're doing," she says. "I really believe in spreading that. It sounds cheesy, but I want to spread the joy of flowers."

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### Von Pollaro's take-away

Do what you know, make sure you are passionate about it and then find ways to grow within that area.

### Petals for the People, a division of Urban Petals LLC

**What it does:** A floral subscription service, where members receive fresh flower bundles on a weekly or biweekly basis

**Owner:** Sarah von Pollaro

**Location:** D.C.

**Employees:** Two, plus additional seasonal staff

### Revenue:

2007 \$250,000

2008 \$260,000

2009 \$230,000 (projected)