



# Truly Moms Are

// STORY BY MICHELE MILES GARDINER

// PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH BREWER

126

SEPTEMBER 2007



**MADE FROM THE HEART** Adorned with splashy hues of lime and pink and sumptuous tones of chocolate and cream, the Truly Mom collection of stationery, invitations—and now, a specially designed planner for Neiman Marcus—is crafted by a quartet of women whose grit is only outshone by their grace.



**IF YOU SAW THEM AT STARBUCKS** IN PASADENA SIPPING GREEN TEA, YOU MIGHT IMAGINE THESE FOUR WOMEN HAVE TROUBLE-FREE LIVES. THEY SMILE EASILY. THEY'RE ATTRACTIVE. ANY ONE OF THEM COULD BE AN ACTRESS—AND ONE WAS. YOU'D HEAR THEM CHATTING ENTHUSIASTICALLY—AND YOU'D BE CERTAIN THEY'RE NOT TALKING BUSINESS. BUT YOU'D BE WRONG.

Maria Newton, Kim Arial and Kristin Nicastro, are three of the four partners of a Pasadena-based business called Truly Mom. (Michelle Nicastro, Kristen's sister and the fourth member of the team, is on a trip with her family and unable to make it to the coffeehouse gathering.) Their inventive inventory includes mom-specific planners, stationery and other products festooned in such eye-catching patterns as pink polka dots and lime-green stripes.

Although they've only been in business a few years, the foursome has just been asked to create a hot pink patent leather planner, called the Mary Jane, exclusively for Neiman Marcus. Truly Mom also is now the official stationery for Organized Magazine.

But as impressive as their business successes are, none of that compares to the rest of their story—how friends, family and community came together and the astounding determination, generosity and gratitude the women have had, even while facing life's most frightening moments.

### Truly Remarkable

The idea for the planner evolved out of Michelle's initial question: "How can I help people organize their lives so that they have more time to do the things that give them joy?"

The union of the four women was serendipitous, they all agree.

"Some things are just meant to be," Maria said. "As a friend of mine told me, 'When you put something out there, and you're

passionate about it, it takes on wings of its own—it just goes.' It was meant to be that we were to meet Michelle and Kristin."

The women met at Mayfield Junior School in Pasadena. By September 2003, Kim and Maria, both with children in fifth and second grade, had already known each other for years when Michelle's two kids—also in fifth and second grade—transferred to the school.

### A Surprise Setback

In April, Michelle received devastating news. The breast cancer she had thought to be in remission was back as secondary breast cancer, known as Her2; it had spread to her hips, ribs and spine, eventually causing her spine to collapse.

After a few weeks in the hospital, her husband brought her back to their Toluca Lake home.

"Little by little, Michelle built up immunity over summer," Kim said. "She's very determined."

Even when she was in a wheelchair, Michelle surprised everyone by announcing, "I'm going to walk on the first day of school."

That September, at the very beginning of the school year, Kristin drove Michelle to Mayfield Jr. Maria, already at the school, watched Michelle enter with her walker.

Maria recalled how Michelle said, "Watch me." And then let go of her walker.

### A Business Brews

Michelle gradually grew stronger, and Kim and Maria accompanied her during her twice-a-month, 45-minute-long Herceptin and Faslodex treatments at Dr. Steven Applebaum's office in Pasadena—just as they do today.

Before or after those appointments, they'd go to Starbucks. It was during these get-togethers when the women—Maria an artist, Kim an entrepreneur, Kristin with a talent for graphic design and Michelle with her new insight on the world—would toss around dreams and ideas.

"Michelle would always say, while watching mothers running in, rushed. 'They're missing it. They don't realize how important those moments are,'" Kim said.

Maria added: "Michelle said, 'How can we help them organize their time so they have more time to spend doing things that give them joy?'"

Kim said they asked themselves, "What if we came up with a planner that organizes their lives—their calls, what's for dinner, gifts to purchase, kids' activities?"

The next day, Kim showed her friends a planner she made out of a plastic folder—the type kids use for school reports. Next, they hand made prototypes out of book cloth and chip board—supplies they'd used in their kids' school projects. The women filled them with pads they printed for notes and lists and gave them to 30 friends to try out. After a few months of using them, their friends came back with positive feedback.

"At this point we didn't really know what we were doing," Kim said. "We Googled binder manufacturers and found one in North Hollywood."

After meeting with a manufacturer and plotting out their strategy, Truly Mom's first shipment of planners arrived that May. The women began selling them soon afterward.

"It's different," Kim said of the product line. "There's a pocket for receipts. You can tear off lists ... notes for teachers, Post-Its, shopping lists—it's an office on the go."

Then, in another serendipitous occurrence, a set designer from the soap opera "The Young and the Restless" who had the same physical therapist as Michelle saw the therapist's Truly Mom planner and loved it so much she ordered a bunch for the soap opera actors to carry on air.

Not long after that, one of Maria's friends stopped by her house and suggested the budding entrepreneurs take the Truly Mom planners to the California Gift Show in Los Angeles.

They did and were a huge hit—and they haven't stopped since.

*pasadena*