

BY EDDY GOLDBERG

# ARTISTIC VISION

## Raising a generation that values the power and passion of art

**T**urning your passion into a successful business is every entrepreneur's dream. Turning it into a business that helps other entrepreneurs realize *their* dreams is even better. Combine that with helping children realize their own creativity and passion is the best.

"We attract people who really want to make a difference," says Bette Fetter, founder of Young Rembrandts, a children's drawing program with nearly 100 offices in the U.S. and abroad. Her home-based business, which she started in the Chicago area, soon grew to have 90 teachers working part-time.

"The company started out as Bette's Art Class, but when I incorporated I wanted the name of an artist who was known for his technical skill. Rembrandt is known for his ability to draw and paint, and for his real mastery of art technique," says Fetter, who, in addition to being an educator, is an artist herself. (See her water color of one of the brand's students on page 61.)

<b>NAME:</b> Bette Fetter
<b>TITLE:</b> Founder, CEO
<b>BRAND:</b> Young Rembrandts
<b>SYSTEM-WIDE REVENUE:</b> \$9.5 million
<b>NO. OF UNITS:</b> 97
<b>INTERNATIONAL UNITS:</b> 5
<b>PUBLIC OR PRIVATE?</b> Private
<b>YEAR COMPANY FOUNDED:</b> 1992
<b>YEAR STARTED FRANCHISING:</b> 2001
<b>YOUR YEARS IN FRANCHISING:</b> 15

Most programs are taught as after-school enrichment programs in schools, their popularity fueled by cutbacks in public school art budgets. "It's much more convenient for the parents and also allows more children to participate in the arts," says Fetter, who's also written a book, *Being Visual: Raising a Generation of Innovative Thinkers*.

Franchising at Young Rembrandts is based on a managerial model, but Fetter says a passion for children and art is a key ingredient in her most successful franchisees. "We are such a passionate business," she says, citing research showing that franchisees who are passionate about their product or service do better than those who aren't. Franchisees hire part-time art teachers, who work mostly in the afternoons after school and in summer programs.

They often are veterans of successful corporate careers who possess "serious business skills," she says. The model allows them to work out of their home and set their own schedule.

Fetter says women in business



today generally have many more options than when she was growing up. “I was an accountant like my mom told me,” she says. “This time it’s for me.”

## GETTING STARTED

**What inspired you to start your business?** I was teaching art classes out of my home and at a local Montessori school as a favor to a friend and they were in high demand, so I decided to expand and turn it into a home-based business. I thought it could be a good part-time gig while raising my family.

**What is your background, and how did it prepare you for starting your business?** My education background is in studio arts, but I was also a mom, working in childcare and doing freelance art. All these things prepared me for entrepreneurship because I was my target market. I also had extensive experience doing art and teaching, which gave me an advantage over other art programs.

**What’s the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** Best: Research your market! When I was first launching I kept selling classes in my hometown, but classes wouldn’t fill up. A friend of mine suggested I try a different city with higher income and more demand for extracurricular activities. It was only a few towns over, but it made all the difference. Worst: I went in for a line of credit and several male bankers told me I was ridiculous and this would never work. One actually told me to go home and take care of my kids.

**Why did you choose franchising?** When we expanded nationally we wanted people to reap the rewards of their efforts. We had a great product, great training material and support, and we needed people who could implement it locally in a way that they would directly benefit. For years my husband worked corporate sales, and we witnessed years and years of him working hard while the company reaped the benefits. We loved franchising because when franchisees dig in and do the work, they reap the rewards of their efforts.

**How did you get started in franchis-**

**ing?** My little part-time business grew into a good-sized business that offered classes throughout the entire northwest suburbs of Chicago. We had a huge teaching staff and taught thousands of kids every week. When it was time to expand nationally, I decided to franchise the business. We had several key employees who had worked in the business for several years and transitioned to working for the franchise company. It was wonderful to have them as part of the management team. Their experience running a Young Rembrandts business was a huge asset when supporting our franchisees.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started? Why? How important was that in building your company?** I started the business by myself. It was a great part-time gig while I raised my four small children. But it was more successful than I expected, and as the demand continued to grow we needed to keep growing. So after a few years my husband left his corporate sales job and joined the company. We were a great combination. I had lived in the trenches developing our product and teaching method. He had always seen the big picture and was very encouraging about how far we could take this.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** We started as a small, home-based business and lived off the revenues we made. As the company grew, we were able to use those revenues to fund the development of the franchise.

## BUILDING THE BUSINESS

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** Best: I am really innovative and creative by nature. Being an entrepreneur has allowed me to use those gifts in every area of the business: product development, marketing, team-building, and internal systems and processes. Hardest: Most of the other people in your life are working for someone else, and as much as they try to understand they have no idea about the lifestyle, responsibilities, joys, hardships, etc. of being an entrepreneur.

**How has your experience in running**

**a franchise business been different from what you expected?** I had no idea who our franchisees would be! I am constantly delighted, impressed, and excited by the level of talent and expertise in the people we have attracted as franchisees. We’re a passionate, mission-driven business and have some high-caliber professionals who have had amazing careers and are now part of the Young Rembrandts community, helping us reach more children and have an impact on education with art.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** The biggest change in our years running the business and franchising has been the shift to email marketing, websites, and social media. None of that even existed when I started the business. I look back at our paper ads and my handwritten newsletters and am astounded at the evolution our marketing alone has gone through.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** Founding the brand was all about boots on the ground, pushing, selling, hiring, etc. But leading the brand requires something different, something extra. Our mission statement is “Raising generations that value the power, passion, and significance of art.” So for me, it’s meant working on a broader level to get that message out. I published my first book, *Being Visual: Raising a Generation of Innovative Thinkers*, in 2012 and now have a blog and podcast devoted to speaking to the value of art in education. The more I can do to expand the awareness of the arts as central to education, the more our brand will succeed and achieve our mission.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** I’m a team builder and like to work collaboratively. I have a strong vision of the direction of the organization and what our goals are, but it takes a village to get there. I love to find strong people and work together with them so they can bring in their ideas, skills, and expertise and we can take whatever idea I had to an entirely different level.

**What is the key to your company’s success?** Passion. We’re a mission-driv-

## FEMALE FOUNDERS

en business, with tremendous passion for bringing art to kids. Our franchisees, staff, and even the thousands of Young Rembrandts instructors all across the country share the same drive for excellence, art, and education.

### BEING FEMALE

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company? How?** Being a female has been an advantage for me because of the market I'm in. I was very comfortable in the classroom. I had a lot of relationships with schools and teachers because of being a mom and having worked in education. I knew my customers because I *was* my customer!

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?** Some disadvantages I found were my professionals. Lawyers, bankers, and accountants didn't take me seriously because I was a woman. Over the years I have surrounded myself with like-minded professionals—and as it turns out, many of them are women.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Women are still faced with the struggle to balance career and family. With four kids of my own, I was fortunate to have my own business and for it to be in a child-related field. This is why Young Rembrandts attracts corporate professionals, because our business model and target market are all about family and education. One of the things we see when new franchisees come on board is their excitement to build a business and still have a healthy work/life balance—something they couldn't do as easily in Corporate America.

**From a woman's perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** When it comes to work and family, women are still the ones who struggle most to balance or choose one or the other. But now there are more choices for women as far as career versus home life. They can choose to pur-

sue their career while having kids, take time off and be at home, or some variation and it's all okay. It's about choice without judgment.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** Eleanor Roosevelt is one of my heroes. She was all about social causes and in a position of profound influence. She was really in touch with the needs of the people. She made things happen and got things done, with immense grace and professionalism.

that means being in the office three full days a week, doing more operational and CEO kind of work. The other two days a week are devoted to thought leadership: writing for my blog, recording the podcast, planning, strategizing, speaking, product development, and networking. I refer to this as my "genius time," and it's invaluable.

**How do you maintain a work/life balance?** I started my own business because I wanted to maintain work/life balance, and for years I've been blessed to



**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** I have a strong network of female professionals who have been invaluable in my personal and business development. And most of them are entrepreneurs!

**Are you involved in any female entrepreneur organizations?** I was involved in the Women Presidents' Organization for several years, but not currently. They are a great group of women leaders, many of them entrepreneurs who really share and encourage other women in business. Right now I have several female friends who are entrepreneurs and we are each other's support group!

### PERSONAL

**What does your typical day look like?** As a leader I truly believe you need to spend as much time working for the future as you are working in the present. For me

do just that. I had four young kids when I started my business and managed to adapt my schedule along the way to be very available for them, involved in their education and activities, while still growing a great business.

**What are your top 5 favorite things to do?** 1) I love my job! We have a remarkably dynamic staff who love what they do. They care deeply about our franchisees and their success. They're innovative, creative, and always looking to make things even better than they already are. I love to work with our franchisees, too. We are a happy, productive group that loves what we do. 2) I love children. Children are so full of possibility and promise. I'm enormously thankful my life's work and career have all been about kids and art. Everything we do is about educating, empowering, and valuing kids. 3) I love art. I love seeing, making, and sharing art. Young

## FEMALE FOUNDERS

Rembrandts has been a wonderful way to encourage, share, and teach others the joy of doing art. When I do get to the drawing board myself I enjoy drawing, color pencils, and watercolors. 4) I really enjoy developing new products. I'm one of those right-brain innovative and creative thinkers, so when I see a need I really enjoy figuring out how to fill it. 5) I love spending time with my family. My adult children are my dearest friends and the grandchildren are a delight. We all enjoy cooking shows and our time in the kitchen together, as well as vacations, reading, and any time we spend together.

**What are 3 key words to describe yourself?** Innovative, passionate, determined.

### LESSONS/ADVICE

**What's the most important lesson you've learned so far?** Know your strengths and weaknesses, but challenge

yourself to grow with your company. There were times as we grew that I doubted my ability to lead a larger, changing organization. But with the help of the right consultants and continued development of my own skills, I discovered new abilities and strengths. And I'm really happy about that because I love my company. I love my brand and am excited that I'm strong enough to take it so much further than I originally imagined.

**What's the best piece of advice you have ever been given?** A friend of mine once said, "You're a visionary, and every visionary needs an implementer." Hearing this really affected me. I never really thought about it that way. Entrepreneurs are visionary and may know their own business really well and have lots more ideas, but they need a staff that can implement their ideas. Ever since then I've been very intentional about building a team with skills that balance and complement my abilities and theirs as well.

### WHAT'S NEXT

**What would you like to achieve in the next 5 years?** I would like to really expand the number of our domestic franchisees as well as our international presence. There are millions of children in the world, and only a fraction get to experience the arts on a daily or weekly basis. I want to change that. I also want to expand our reach so more people understand the value of the arts and honor those kids and adults who think differently and thrive when given the tools to create and express themselves artistically.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** Young Rembrandts is now aligned with global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's new early learning app, Curious World. We are thrilled to be a part of Curious World as now even more children can experience a part of what we offer in the classroom using the mobile app. And we have a few other projects like that in the works. ■

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