

Small Business Support Squad: Cosigning on Success

A thriving business reveals its secret weapon: the honest advice of a lifelong friend



The image of a successful entrepreneur is often that of a lone wolf, someone who has the drive and passion to guide their business idea to life largely on their own. While a strong inner compass is a must, it's a myth that every entrepreneur brings their vision to life singlehandedly. This is especially true for small business owner Louise Masin Sattler, founder of Signing Families™, a sign language instructional company based in Los Angeles. Louise has always relied on one particular cheerleader, her business-savvy best friend, Mary Susa Ricardo. From the very start and through the years, Mary has reinforced Louise's confidence, faith and passion, supplying all the wisdom and extra courage she needed to launch and grow her business.

Louise's trust in and respect for Mary is so profound because they share a friendship that spans 50-plus years. They spent a childhood as next-door neighbors in Lake Ronkonkoma, a suburb on Long Island, New York.

According to Mary, Louise was always the leader. "She made up this summer camp," says Mary. "Although it was just the two of us, we had our own camp song and a lemonade stand. Louise was an entrepreneur even then."

Louise has come a long way since her lemonade stand days. A nationally certified school psychologist, she spent two decades working in schools and using sign language to help children with exceptional needs. "I worked with families who had kids with pretty significant communication issues, whether they were deaf, or whether they had autism or related disorders," says Louise. "I would tell these parents that it would really help them communicate better with their child if they could learn some sign language."

The idea was there, but Louise knew conventional sign language classes were too high a barrier for these parents; they were already much too overextended to attend a series of classes. Louise refined her plan and pulled off something that only the scrappiest of underdogs could do: She began selling what she describes as "little homegrown DVDs" door-to-door.

"I define courage as going out of your comfort zone because you're motivated by the process and you're doing it with good intentions," says Louise. "I don't think Mary had ever said, 'That's a really stupid idea.' Mary was always the positive one."

Before long, Louise couldn't keep up with customer demand. After securing an educational products distribution deal in 2006, Signing Families was officially born. Louise has since grown the company and expanded her offerings to include sign language resources for emergency responders. "Louise has always been a mover and a shaker," says Mary. "With Signing Families, she has really found her niche."

The admiration is mutual. At the height of her career, Mary was running the product development division of an international clothing manufacturing company. Watching her nearest and dearest friend excel professionally also stoked Louise's courage and propelled her forward. "Every time I walked into [one of her company's stores], I thought, 'Mary put that outfit there,'" says Louise. "I was always in awe. I thought if she can do it, maybe I can. ... Women can be in business and be very strong entrepreneurs. I credit Mary for that. ... Mary really is a role model."

A decade ago, while Louise was busy launching Signing Families, Mary took a hiatus from her career to devote time to her newborn daughter Kelsey. Back then, Louise was living with her family in Maryland, and Mary had settled in New Jersey. Louise started sending Mary sign language materials so she could teach her baby daughter Kelsey how to sign. Teaching hearing infants simple sign language to help them express their emotions or needs, like "drink," "eat," "mother," and "father," can be an effective communication tool that also helps to reduce frustration while their verbal skills develop. Mary and Kelsey soon became Louise's unofficial focus group. "It was really invaluable having Kelsey serve as the demo child," said Louise. "I was able to identify what was working and what wasn't."

As Kelsey grew, Mary continued to teach her how to sign using Louise's Signing Families DVDs. When Kelsey reached school age, she showed everyone in her classroom that she knew how to sign. "She was so proud of herself," says Mary. "And it was really all because of Aunt Louise."

Beyond providing Louise with some stellar "market research" throughout the years, Louise credits Mary with being a reliable soundboard, the person who has helped her stay balanced and grounded throughout her career

and personal ups and downs. “When I had cancer—and I was still running my business with cancer—Mary was there for me

While Mary has truly been a pillar of support through thick and thin, Louise has also been emboldened by knowing her small business insurer, Hiscox, is there for her, too. “I have **professional liability insurance** for my work as a business owner and for social media coverage. [Having] Hiscox is like having a support team and makes me feel a sense of peace about taking chances.”

In 2012, Louise found the courage to exit her comfort zone yet again when her husband accepted a job offer that moved them from their home in Maryland to the Los Angeles area. Louise struggled with leaving everything after a lifetime living on the East Coast, including many close friends, and an aging parent and in-laws. Again, Mary was there, there, picking up the phone to help Louise navigate through that challenging midlife transition.

Today, Signing Families continues to thrive and has helped Louise put her own two kids through college. But, for Louise, it was never about monetary success. “I wanted to help the parents who sat across the table from me who could not communicate with their children. That was the endgame for me. Everything else was just gravy.”