

# Life in LAMORINDA

## The Gift of Gab:

### Orinda Resident's Creative Question Cards Spark Conversations

By Jennifer Wake

Nearly everyone has had an idea for a product or service at one time or another. But only those who take the idea from concept to product can truly call themselves entrepreneurs.

Orinda resident Cristy Clarke has always been quick to come up with new business ideas. In 2002, on the way to a dinner party with her husband, she thought it would be a good idea to jot down some questions to help the conversation along. The response was so positive, she knew she had a good idea. Soon after, she developed a prototype and began extensive research on production and importation.

In 2004 Clarke founded TableTopics, selling small acrylic lacquer boxes filled with a stack of 135 "conversation starter" cards, each with a question on the back. Questions range from "If you could give all human beings one virtue, which would you choose?" to "What do you think is the ideal age?" There are specialized versions with questions for family, teens, couples, golfers and even sets for those following Election 2008.

Now available at more than 1,800 retailers in the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, and

New Zealand, sales of the unique cards reached approximately \$3 million last year. Yet it wasn't the first business venture for Clarke.

As a college student, she started a typing business where she would type term papers for desperate college students who would come by the night before a paper was due. "I'd charge them an arm and a leg," Clarke said. "They'd pay it and I'd type their paper all night."

After college, she started a company likened to a fast food caterer called Just Hors d'Oeuvres in Lafayette, but sold the business when she started her family. Clarke stayed home with

her children for the next 10 years, letting her ideas "percolate." But she never lost sight of starting another business. TableTopics was a perfect fit.

"I thought it would be great to have questions on the table - at dinner, at cocktail parties. And with the Internet, I could work from home," Clarke said. "It's been a huge growth experience going from a service to a product, but it's why I went with the TableTopics idea. In the service industry, I was limited by time - and food was rotting in my garage."

After starting TableTopics, the Clarke family garage mor-

phed into a clearing house where Clarke's three daughters, Kelly, 15, Kate, 14, and Lily, 11, filled orders from the online store they developed.

"The girls had a lot of ideas, and told me we should sell it online," Clarke said. "I said, 'Go for it.' They started the Web site targeting Christmas 2005, and got it up and online in October [of that year] through Yahoo store. One of the girls did all the order processing, while the others boxed up and shipped out."

Clarke said they started getting 30 to 40 orders a day, and in the month of January 2006 they packed 1,000 orders. "They lasted until about April, and then I had to send it down to a fulfillment house," Clarke said.

"It was so much fun seeing them in the garage filling the orders, but they would have had to quit school to continue," she added, laughing.

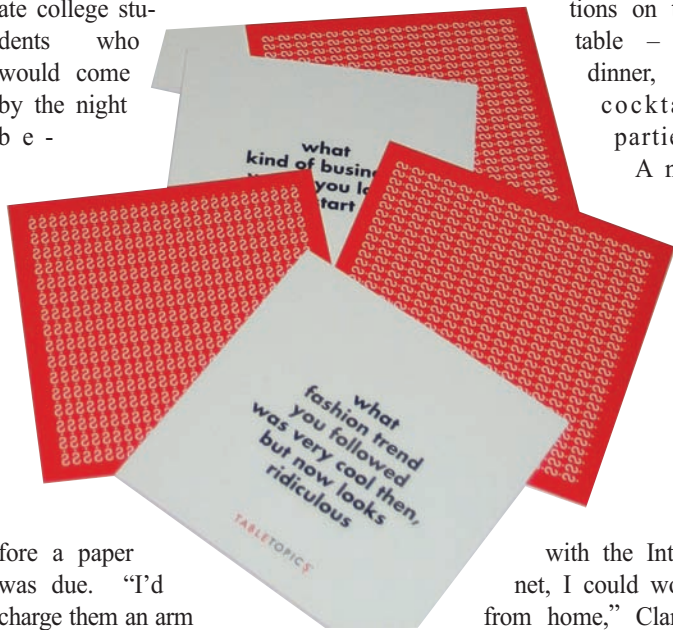
Recently, Clarke began to miss the extra time she had with her daughters before the success of TableTopics and considered selling it. Her girls said no. "When I talk about selling the business, they're the ones that say don't do it."

"They've really become part

of this and see the value of this experience. It's not the money or the number of stores we're in," Clarke said. "The real value for me, as a mom, is that at some point in our lives we can stop growing. They've seen that if you get out of

your comfort zone, it's amazing what it gives you personally."

For information about TableTopics, you can visit their Web site at: [www.tabletopics.com](http://www.tabletopics.com).



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## Letting the Beauty of Mature Women Shine

By Sophie Braccini



Photo session with Penelope Lippincott & Patti Camras

Photo courtesy Fuse

Achievement has always been the trade mark of Patti Camras. The former President of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce, a successful real estate agent, is beginning to build an additional career: modeling. In the first issue of Fuse, a new Lafayette fashion magazine, the 63 year old model shines in the most simple of outfits, radiating mature beauty and confidence.

Camras got into this new pastime quite unexpectedly. She modeled for the Orinda fashion show organized by the Orinda Women's Club and when a friend saw her picture she referred her to Penelope Lippincott, Director of Fuse. Lippincott is not an agent,

she manages several businesses all linked to fashion. Her latest addition, Fuse, promotes local fashion designers featuring models in their early twenties as well as mature women. A professional fashion photographer, she offers women in their 40's to 60's a training curriculum to become independent models, building their own practice. The training costs between \$1400 and \$4000.

However, for Camras, the experience is transforming her life. She started in March of 2007 by learning basic modeling techniques: posture, walking in high heels, pivot and kick turns, runway presentations, make-up and hairstyle. "The classes are phenomenal," she says,

"Penelope is a coach, a trainer, a teacher. When you pay for the whole cycle of twelve classes, you can retake it over and over. I'm doing it again for the third time and I'm learning a lot."

Camras is known as Patricia Kennedy in the modeling world; having a different name is part of creating the image and marketing strategy. Camras chose the Kennedy last name to convey the elegance and power she so easily embodies. And Patricia Kennedy has already got some jobs lined up. She has worked on "stock jobs," pictures that are taken in specific situations and that can be purchased by marketing professionals; she worked for Fuse, modeling for a handbag company and she was part of a bridal show. "This additional career is totally igniting my enthusiasm and passion," comments Camras, "and the energy is spilling over to my other profession, real estate."

Camras is not the only beautiful mature woman radiating with confidence at Fuse. Connie Menzies, a yoga instructor in her mid fifties, has been training with Lippincott for several months as well.

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