

A Leap of Faith ...

and hope for a soft landing

by Joanne C. Hillhouse

These mavericks know the leap will come, but, for each, the push is different. Usually, the tools are well in hand, which is why the leap is not as reckless as it may seem.

Saadie's Story

Four years ago, Saadie Christian gave in to her instincts, her Earthly Instincts. They had been calling to her for a while; she'd been coupling her freelance art with her 8 to 4 for about 10 years before that. But when she decided to fire the work, her husband, she said, "thought I was totally out of it." It was on his advice that she took a month off to think things through. "He said, 'Saadie, you're not guaranteed a salary'... I said, 'But I am guaranteed happiness.'"

Today, Saadie's colourful little shop in the Craft Market is an artistic oasis – featuring pottery, paintings on canvas, jewellery crafted from fish scales and beads, painted CDs as decorative hangings, miniature painted bottles brimming with Antigua and Barbuda sand, painted calabash bowls....

"I use everything earthly possible that I could find," she said. "I try things and they work."

That's the essence of flying solo, professionally speaking, or "trying a thing."

Which is not to say that it is the same as standing on a cliff, eyes closed, then leaping into the wind, legs scissoring wildly, as the hard body of water below rushes up to meet you; though maybe it feels like that. As a freelance writer, and having spoken to several other independent practitioners for this piece, there's one thing I know: That death-defying leap is often taken with eyes wide open.

"The thought of being my own boss was, admittedly, a little terrifying," said Taryn Doram, who started her own Get Creative Graphics after three years in the production department of another company. "But when I thought of the many possibilities, those emotions very quickly turned into feelings of excitement and anticipation."

Among those who decide – as a former co-worker used to say – to feel the fear but do it any way, there's always a bit of a rebellious streak; an inability to settle into being a cog in the machine; an itch to, as the Fleetwood Mac song says, "go your own way."

As Melissa Gomez of Cinque Productions put it: "I'm stubborn, passionate and always craving no limits." Travel industry veteran Rosie McMaster, also of Susie's Hot Sauce fame, declared, "I just liked the sound and feel of being my

and more – knew that, after 20 years in marketing and communications for several multi-national businesses, she had the goods.

"Changing jobs in 2004 put that dream on the front burner," she said. "I always knew that God would let me know when it was the right time, and I began putting things in place slowly, so that whenever that right time came I would be ready."

Meanwhile, Colin James, a freelance journalist, knew that he could make it on



Saadie Christian at her Earthly Instincts.

own boss!"

"We've both had more than 15 years experience working for national and multi-national companies in the UK, in the retailing and banking sectors, and had developed our understanding of business best practices, promotions, marketing, product merchandising, profit management, distribution, financing, banking and IT," said Colin and Alison Sly-Adams, owners of the World Wide Web's Antigua Nice Ltd. since 2003.

Keva Margetson, of KJM Communications Plus – offering consulting services in training, event management,

his own. After all, he said, "at my last full-time, I was working an average of 10 to 12 hours sometimes [for] the same pay with more stresses. So I knew if I devoted the same commitment to working freelance, it would pay. When the opportunity presented itself, I had no second thoughts."

These reflections call to mind that saying about luck: that it happens when preparation meets opportunity. Often, these mavericks know the leap will come, but, for each, the push is different.

"My previous job experiences were at offshore betting companies," said Ken

Shipley, who creates and builds websites through his Thin Red Line Designs. "... Working relations were quite strained, and the company was having some financial difficulties; so we parted ways.

fearing involuntary – severance, swimming lessons are now mandatory. Survival may mean going your own way; but that can be a good thing ... really.

"...The dialogue started while we were still in university," said Gomez, who co-owns the multimedia outfit Cinque with Christopher Hodge. "The more we studied, the more we realized that our very different, but complementary, skill sets could be combined to form a very unique company."

But in Hodge's case, there was a gap of several years between college and Cinque, during which he worked at a sports book while moonlighting with a production company. Gomez, meanwhile, worked full-time with HAMA before striking out on her own.

'CHARGING WHAT I DESERVE ... HAS BEEN A CHALLENGE.'

"I've realized that my best work happens when I feel most free," she said.

But there are dreams and then there are dollars, and a bit of the latter helps make the former possible.

"There are a lot of fears that come with starting your own production and



Above: Colin and Alison Adams of Antigua Nice participating in a local telecoms showcase.

Below: Mitzi and Howard at the Career Affair showcase.

Lucky for me, I managed to get a contract working on a major website within my first few days out of work."

For HAMA principals, Howard and Mitzi Allen, the push was backed by hurricane-force winds – category four Hurricane Luis, at that. Both were out of work after Luis, having worked for the same company, CTV, at the time. "Howard decided that he would not go back to the company," said Mitzi, whose leap came several years – and several more full-time jobs – after her husband's. "My move to independence came when it was clear he needed full-time help to get the business to the next stage."

So, you've hit the water – hard – now what do you do? Well, to mis-quote Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*: "Swim, you fools."

With the Caricom Single Market no longer on the horizon but right up in our faces, and with many public-sector workers contemplating voluntary – and



Christopher and Melissa's Story

multimedia company in an island like Antigua," Gomez said. "Is there enough of a market? Will we be able to do well? Will people take us seriously? To this day, people still ask us, 'Can you really do

well in Antigua with what you do...?"

But when she was turning away freelance work while on her full-time job, she realized that, yes, there was definitely a market.

"Each time I turned away work, I

"Learning to ask for what you deserve is one of the hardest [things] because, particularly in my field in the islands, training is not a priority and the skill is not respected," said Pat Edwards-Southwell of Performance Enhance-

forming under the Trinity Band name, said, "I don't think we are respecting the entertainers from Antigua as much as we respect the Jamaicans and other artistes who come here... Most of the hotels don't want to respect you for your ability as a musician."

Myrtle Looby, CEO and primary consultant with LEAP Training Consultants, concurs. "...Some persons prefer to pay more to 'foreign' consultants, [so] charging what I deserve for my services has been a challenge," she said. "Besides, in a small environment, the options are limited."

And, Edwards-Southwell noted, in that small environment, sometimes "who you people be" is more important than what you know.

"I started marketing by sending out letters," she said. "But, here, everyone wanted to know your pedigree: Who was your family? ... I did a lot of volunteering. I operate on trust to get paid and for clients not to cancel at the last minute... I chose not to use a contract. It has



Cinque at work.

began to wonder whether I was limiting myself by being locked in a full-time position," Gomez said. "...When Christopher and I did finally decide to take the plunge, I made a vow to surround myself with as many artists and creative people

as possible. And I'm glad to say that I feel like I've kept that promise. Working alongside other professionals... keeps our skills up to date and gives us a very special community amongst whom we can discuss ideas, problems, challenges."

But let's talk brass tacks. Can you get paid doing what you love? And if so, how? Turns out this is one of the biggest challenges that comes with flying solo.

"The main difficulty we had was getting paid for our projects on time," Mitzi said. "This would create a serious cash-flow problem."



Cinque on the set of Eco Zone.

ment Services. "...I've had to insist and turn down jobs because clients want to pay less."

Curtis Cochrane, a musician per-

worked for me, because I am not totally dependent on that income to live."

Adding to this chorus is Michelle Laville, who helms Cactus Cards. "Get-

**'THE FREEDOM
... IS
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ting paid is not always easy," she said. "It is no fun asking someone for money when you know things are slow all over.

**THAT'S RIGHT:
NETWORKING
IS KEY.**

Due to the fact that my product is almost exclusively sold to tourists, we see a sharp decline in sales during the summer months... This is the most difficult time for me... I become very frustrated when my customers put me in the situation to have to make harsh decisions that will ultimately have a negative im-

ways feel that they can pay more, but it is the market that dictates the fees."

Of course, there is the payment cycle, which differs significantly from having a fixed income. As James said, "There are times when payments are delayed... so you would have to send out reminders. It can be frustrating, especially when bills and obligations have to be taken care of."

But, as with swimming, you have to use your strengths and capitalize on your opportunities. And the ones who've made it work, so far, have done just that.

"My first job was through a recommendation by a family member and from there 'word of mouth,'" Taryn said. "The quality of my work and the recommendations of my clients handled the rest."

Antigua Nice concurs that it's results that matter. "Unless we deliver customers – there is no reason for us to exist," they said. "Our sole purpose is to put buyers in touch with sellers – whether it be goods or services – and, very important, not to take any commissions or compete with our customers in any way... It's not just as simple as putting up a website. You still have to get traffic."

Margetson added, "As a marketing professional, I knew the importance of branding, so I engaged the services of independent graphic designer, Taryn Doram. I called a few strategic individuals to let them know I was in the market, and before my business cards were even finalized, I had landed my first assignment."

That's right: Networking is key. As Looby indicated, "I have a small group of 'sisters' who are in constant contact with one another. We share prayers and provide motivation during challenging times; we discuss personal issues and professional matters; we recommend one another's products and services to others; and we team up on certain projects. In a way, we feel a sense of responsibility for the success of each member of our team."

To hold the line, though, each freelancer, independent practitioner, entrepreneur – whatever you choose to call yourself – needs to deliver and stay on top of his/her game. And at times, the hours can be a recipe for burnout.

"Depending on our workload, we sometimes have seven 12-hour workdays each week, and, consequently, time with loved ones often gets sacrificed in order to meet deadlines," Gomez noted.

Working with your partner, while lending an element of support to the leap, "can be hard on your relationship," added the Antigua Nice duo.

It can be a jerky roller coaster ride, and sometimes you just want to get off, or maybe just stop at the top and enjoy the view for a minute before the next free fall. But when it works, it works.



Pat Edwards Southwell of Performance Enhancement Services.

pact on them; but that is all part of flying solo."

Christopher said of Cinque's growing pains, "[A] major factor that can create or prevent a cash-flow crisis is the ability of clients to pay on time. This can be absolutely crippling. As a result, we have had to institute a policy of requiring a 50% deposit... and 50% final payment upon production completion for all clients, without exception."

Actually what's required, once you've researched and settled on reasonable rates, I've found, is a delicate balance between toughness and flexibility; knowing when to yield and when to stand firm.

"Depending on how badly I wanted to get a particular company on my portfolio, my cost would be negotiable," Shipley said. And James noted, "You al-



Ken Shipley.

Saadie plans to launch an online catalogue and dreams about opening her own gallery, where she can market the art of physically challenged and terminally ill people as part of an art-as-therapy initiative. It may sound clichéd, she said, but "I only knew when I got into it how much the sky's the limit."

AS FOR THE OTHERS...

HAMA: "We can't imagine going

back to work for a company other than our own. We like the freedom of deciding what we are going to do next..."

Shipley: "I found the strain and pressure I was accustomed to in the workplace had vanished! There was no

cheque; there's no vacation pay or sick leave. ...Being self-employed means being very good at budgeting and saving. I do not see myself becoming a millionaire with this business, but it has proven to be rewarding in many ways."

James: "The rewards, at times, may not be as fulfilling; but the satisfaction comes from trying your best and receiving the feedback from the readers, listeners, etc. I welcome criticism over praise, because when I'm criticized I try even harder."

McMaster: "I chose a career that I loved and enjoyed. My journey as an entrepreneur was not easy. It involves some months without salary. ... There are many dragons along the way, [but] as I look back on my professional experiences and achievements, I have quite a measure of satisfaction!"

Antigua Nice: "The most satisfying part of the job is a customer who calls to tell you they just got a booking. Seeing a business put into place strategies that you have discussed and be successful doing so is very rewarding."

Doram: "It was totally worth it! [Yes], everything rests on my shoulders, so even if I'm sick I have to work. [But] I feel fulfilled when my clients are happy and I know I've done my job. When my clients recommend other people to me, that's a sign that they believe in me, my work, and my ability to produce."

Margetson: "The uncertainty of the next cheque is constantly on my mind. But my faith in God's promise to take care of me keeps me focused on those things I need to do to succeed."

Joanne's Story

I write because I love it, and, for the past few years, I also write to live. Literally.

I ended up "unemployed," as I sometimes facetiously respond to questions about my state and fortunes, thanks to one of those critical life stops we all

experience: The situation at my last job had become untenable, and I opted to pass on the contract which I had the option of renewing.

Having freelanced, on the side, through much of my working life, and with one steady gig lined up, I had something to build on. It's been a learning process, with as much error as trial. The hardest part, I think, has been dealing with the uneven rhythm and, subsequent, financial insecurities – especially in light of fixed obligations, like a mortgage. In fact, dealing with finances, period: From setting rates to getting paid on time; balancing life and work; balancing work writing with my personal writing; and, of course, asking for and getting what I deserve.

I don't love the business side of business, but I do what needs to be done; after all, I need to eat.

But is it worth it? I think so. Sure, I may still be at the computer at four in the morning more mornings than I'd like; and, sure, the weight of everything may at times feel heavy. But I particularly love being away from workplace politics; being able to focus on the job minus the crap.

I love the diverse projects I've been able to work on – from scripting TV projects to helming magazine projects; from brainstorming on public service announcements to feature-writing assignments, be they local or regional, and corporate writing jobs. I love the flexibility of my hours. I like being able to stop in the middle of the day if it isn't happening, even if it means being at the computer in the small hours when it finally is cooking.

Knock on wood. I want to continually strive to find a way to remain free of the corporate structure, and, as I strive for balance, find a way to be free of the pressures I put on myself.

After all, freedom, in the many ways we can be free, is what this crazy ride is all about. That, and a lot of faith.



Michelle Laville, owner of Cactus Cards.

one looking over my shoulder; there were no urgent deadlines except the ones I set; and I was in full control of managing the project. It's been almost five years now, and nothing better has turned up. In fact, the jobs keep getting better."

Hodge and Gomez: "... Going to the gym at 2 p.m. to clear the mind; writing a script in the middle of the day; doing a painting on a Monday morning or making a documentary mid-week; the freedom to be able to do so is absolutely priceless."

Laville: "I feel I have more control. More time for my family. [I'm] able to travel when I want, not when my boss allows me. Some days I don't get to stop for lunch, but others I can spend an hour or two. There isn't the security of that pay