

Bratz Biz organizers, alumni reflect on 20 years

THE MARKET RETURNS ON NOV. 29 AND 30 AT THE WESTIN RESORT AND SPA

BY **DAVID SONG**

BRATZ BIZ is about to return for a 20th kick at the can.

Known as Whistler's premier youth artisan market, Bratz Biz was founded by Carmen Laslett and Susan Rolands. They stayed at the helm for approximately a decade until encountering Lee Schwartz and Craig Lovell, who voiced interest in taking over. Schwartz and Lovell became the new volunteer organizers by 2017, and they remain passionate about what they do.

"The 20th anniversary is super exciting," remarks Schwartz. "I think Bratz Biz has made huge effects in a lot of kids' lives over the years, and I think it's a real goal to have an organization that's made 20 years—especially through COVID."

Craig likewise understands the value of galvanizing kids and teenagers into action because he works as a program manager with Junior Achievement British Columbia (JABC), which focuses on developing financial literacy and workplace readiness in the next generation. JABC helped facilitate preparatory workshops for Bratz Biz participants this year.

Jordan Lovell, Craig's son, has been a part of the market for half a decade selling upcycled skis and snowboards. Now in his third year of a bachelor's degree in sustainability at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Okanagan, the 20-year-old credits Bratz Biz for helping him gain hands-on skills, money management savvy and an interest in environmental stewardship.

"There's different motivations for youth getting involved in Bratz Biz, but certainly some are motivated by profit and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that," Craig says. "Jordan made enough money to pay off some expensive mountain bikes and buy a laptop. Succeed or fail, youth gain valuable expertise...communication, work ethic and resilience."

Bratz Biz 2025 will continue to invite local performers on stage: the Whistler Children's Chorus and 17-year-old singer/guitarist Jaxon Mishaw. Arden Thorne, who is also employed by Tourism Whistler, has recently joined Schwartz and Craig as market manager.

BACK IN BIZ Young entrepreneurs from the 2024 Bratz Biz market.

PHOTO BY JOERN ROHDE / COURTESY OF BRATZ BIZ

IN THEIR WORDS

Perhaps an effective way to describe Bratz Biz's impact on its community is to hear from some of the young men and women who have experienced it first-hand.

"I think one of the most valuable things I learned was about finances and the economy," remarked Stella Schwartz, 18, who sold coat hooks and organic peanut butter with her sister Lydia during her decade-long involvement with Bratz Biz. "I've always learned best by diving in and figuring things out as I go, so getting hands-on experience with things like balancing prices with rising supply costs was both stressful and kind of fun.

"It's one thing to learn about profit margins in class, but it's a whole different story when you're the one trying to sell peanut butter while the cost of peanuts and jars skyrockets. I definitely came out of it with a new appreciation for every small business owner out there, and a much better sense of how money actually moves in the real world."

Stella's intrepid nature continues to serve her well as a first-year adventure studies major at Thompson Rivers University.

"Being a part of Bratz Biz meant everything for me," says Coen Hamm, 17, who primarily sells his organic dried apples online nowadays. "It gave me an early introduction to being an entrepreneur and gave me the support and guidance to have fun while being successful. I liked being a part of the market because it allowed me to meet new people and step out of my comfort zone at a young age.

"By attending the market I learned planning, budgeting, marketing, organizational skills and how to develop a profitable and sustainable product. My [three-year] Bratz Biz experience was very positive. I can't say enough great things about the event and opportunity—so much that it has become a big factor in my decision to pursue a degree in business after high school."

Sophi Lawrence hawked dog bandanas and decorative birch reindeer from nine to 13 years of age before representing Canada at the UCI Downhill World Championships. Now 20, she studies animal biology at UBC and remarks that her favourite part of Bratz Biz was how "grown-up and official" it was: presenting products for approval from the jury, establishing her booth and operating a Square payment device made her feel like "a proper entrepreneur."

Lauren Hamm, also 20, commented: "Being part of Bratz Biz was such a memorable experience. I really enjoyed the selling aspect: talking to people, sharing my product, and being part of the festive atmosphere. I loved seeing all of the creative products made by other young entrepreneurs. It was inspiring to be surrounded by so many ideas and to feel part of a group that was all working hard to bring their projects to life.

"Through Bratz Biz, I learned about budgeting, marketing, and how to present a product in a way that makes people excited to buy it. Most importantly, I learned how to take an idea and turn it into a business. It meant a lot to be part of something that supports young entrepreneurs in our community. Thank you to everyone who continues to make Bratz Biz possible."

Lauren sold her own brand of gourmet granola in those days and is currently pursuing a dual degree in management and integrated engineering at UBC.

EMERGING FROM THEIR SHELLS

Schwartz finds it particularly gratifying to see kids blossom in confidence during Bratz Biz. Many are shy and nervous to begin with, but end up confidently greeting potential buyers with smiles and eye contact. Even those with special needs can flourish.

Bratz Biz's jury process begins in June, giving youth time to refine their stuff. Craig does not recall anyone being turned down outright—those with flawed ideas are invited to return for a second or third bid to get approved. Youngsters thus learn how to innovate, transforming passion projects into marketable wares of a semi-professional quality.

Despite being a separate endeavour from the concurrent Arts Whistler Holiday Market, Bratz Biz enjoys a symbiotic relationship with its counterpart. Tourists attending the former often find unexpected gems at the latter, while Bratz Biz's tendency to attract families is also helpful when those families meander into the Holiday Market.

"Lee and I have got it dialed in and figured out," says Craig. "We've managed to grow [Bratz Biz] every year. The vendors, the level of sophistication in their crafts ... one thing I really get jazzed about is seeing progression in the youth."

"Bratz Biz is very inclusive and accessible," Schwartz adds. "We haven't changed the price in years. It's a very low price for kids to participate, and we've offset the gap by fundraising and by cash donations from our amazing sponsors."

This month, Bratz Biz runs on Nov. 29 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Nov. 30 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Visit bratzbiz.ca to learn more. ■