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CREATIVELY DRIVEN: Young entrepreneur brings unique do-it-yourself boutique to St. Paul

INVER GROVE HEIGHTS, M.N., April 10, 2007 – At 26, Kelly Garrett has earned a BBA, an MBA, opened two businesses, and got married in the process. Ekcetera, her second venture, is a two-month-old do-it-yourself creative boutique that will celebrate its Grand Opening April 27.

Garrett, a Fargo, N.D., native, always felt a few years ahead of her age. After accomplishing one goal, she was quickly on to the next. After graduating with her BBA from the University of North Dakota in 2004, Garrett began the graduate business program at the University of St. Thomas just eight months later with an instinct it would lead to something great.

That instinct led her to the desire to start her own business. That desire would grow throughout the intensive two-year full-time program.

"St. Thomas was one of the most life-changing times of my life," Garrett says. "I've always been very shy and quiet, but people noticed as I went through the program how I was changing. I would go out with my mom and she would marvel at the way I could interact with people. Even now, one of my employees told me how I'm great at networking and I can't believe she is actually talking about me!"

Garrett credits the small, close-knit nature of her 28-student graduating class and their dedicated professors.

"Those 28 people are life-long friends now," she says. "I was with them all day, everyday. The staff was phenomenal; they did so much to help us get the most out of the experience, whether it was having professionals speak to our class, being matched up with a mentor or attending networking events.

"I loved that they really focused on ethics. They really dug deep to the core aspect of business and incorporated ethics into every decision. It went beyond what you can learn in a text book."

And it was her courses at St. Thomas that allowed her to fully realize her long-time dream of opening her own business.

"We read a lot of case studies and learned about people who had started great businesses," she says. "I realized they weren't much different than me and thought, 'If they can do it, why can't I?'"

Before graduating, Garrett married her high school sweetheart. While most couples struggle just to get through their first year of marriage, Garrett and her husband had no reservations about adding a new business to the equation.

"We had been together for so long that we'd already been through a lot of the problems married couples go through," she says, "We really didn't have to go through that in our first year. We were too busy!"

Garrett was ready to hit the ground running with her first venture, a design firm called Ekcetera Productions, when she graduated in May 2006.

"It's small, but perfect," Garrett says of the skyway-level suite she leases in downtown St. Paul's Lowry building. "I fell in love with the floor-to-ceiling windows."

Those windows turned out to be a big business generator. The space, a bright, Robin's Egg Blue room is modern with a cozy edge, which was designed to appeal to small business owners in need of design services. Ekcetera's services include graphic and Web site design, video and photo montages, map design, branding, and monogram/logo design.

Not long after the design firm was established, Garrett opened a sister retail store, Ekcetera. The store is a do-it-yourself creative boutique located in the St. Paul suburb of Inver Grove Heights. The idea stemmed from her original venture, but sought to allow others to capture their own creativity and "do-it-themselves."

"I think everyone has creativity, it's just a matter of finding it," Garrett says. "I don't want anyone to leave this store without finding a solution. No matter what it is, even if we don't have the tools to do it, we'll figure out a way to make it happen."

Ekcetera covers a wide range of creative topics. Four computers are loaded with design, photo-editing and Web design software; three color printers (a photo printer, printer-scanner-copier, and large-scale printer) allow customers to print borderless photos up to 13x19, double-sided booklets, and even on canvas; a 'library' area hosts books on crafts and home improvement available for browsing or purchase; a 'kitchen' area contains entertainment necessities such as napkins and bowls; and a professional photo studio and camera are available to rent. You will also find unique gifts and home décor merchandise. The most important aspect of Ekcetera, according to Garrett, is the variety of workshops covering topics such as photo editing, digital scrapbooking, Web site design, jewelry making and much more.

Ekcetera is truly a do-it-yourself store, from the inside out. Not only has Garrett taught herself each of the creative topics the store offers, but she and her husband designed the store from top to bottom. They did everything from erecting the walls to painting and decorating.

"I've never taken any formal classes on design; I teach myself everything," she says. "And doing the build-out ourselves makes me really proud of this store. It makes the concept so much more legitimate."

With that said, the store will continually add topics to its workshop schedule as she learns more or hires employees who have different specialties.

Despite living her life at warp speed, Garrett actually considers herself old-fashioned.

"That is why I am doing this so fast," she says. "I want to establish Ekcetera now so I can take a back seat when I have kids. Enjoying life and my family is important to me."

Another "old-fashioned" goal of hers is to open an Ekcetera in every city in which she has family who would like to be involved.

"A lot of business critics would say it's a poor strategy," she says, "but I want to be able to do that for them. My mom is in Fargo and wishes she could be here to run the store, and it's the same with other long-distance family. I also want something I can pass down to my kids."

Garrett also plans to keep growing Ekcetera in the Twin Cities as soon as she can prove the store can succeed. Then she will set her sights on a national level. While she has a lot of hard work ahead of her to get to that point, she is not afraid to put in the time.

"This is my passion," Garrett says, "I love to make something out of nothing, which applies both as a creative and an entrepreneur. I work 12 hour days, but my mind is always here. If I didn't love it so much, I would be tired of it. But this is my dream and I am going to make it happen."

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*Clockwise from upper left:
Ekcetera's "living room;"
Special event section;
Computer lab; Kelly Garrett.*

