

Starting Up

Girl Starter's Jeannine Shao Collins '86 hopes to set young female entrepreneurs on a path to success.

For **Jeannine Shao Collins** '86, the "light-bulb moment" for how to help young women become entrepreneurs came from a conversation with her daughter.

After attending a women's forum in New York City hosted by Duke University the then 16-year-old Julia Collins returned home full of frustration—and full of ideas.

"We have to do something about this gender equity issue," she told her mother. "The world has to get behind women when they're younger."

"I knew Julia was right," says Collins, a successful magazine and media executive. "There needed to be a forum for young women who want to be entrepreneurs."

Three years later, the result is Girl Starter, a New York City-based media company whose mission is to give girls the tools they need to develop their potential as business leaders. Cofounded by Collins, the company includes a website (GirlStarter.com), a reality TV show that debuted on the cable network TLC last April, and other media channels.

Collins created Girl Starter with her friend, television writer and Broadway producer Dani Davis. They're also cocreators of the TV show of the same name, which offers \$100,000 seed funding and services to the winner.

Also involved were her husband, Chris, a former executive with the *Wall Street Journal* and ESPN; and Julia, now a student at Duke.

Originally planning to major in engineering, Collins switched to economics during her first year at Rochester. After graduation, she moved to New York City and worked in advertising management positions at *Prevention* and *Women's Day* magazines. In 1993, she joined Meredith Corp., a media company that reaches more than 100 million women through its platforms, serving as chief innovation officer and as publisher of *More*, a lifestyle magazine geared toward an older demographic of women.

The Girl Starter team spent more than two years developing the company, work that included conducting focus groups with women 18 to 24 years old. "We discovered that a lot of women found the word 'entrepreneur' intimidating," Collins says.

With the new company, Collins says she's found a new passion.

"Girl Starter is a place to celebrate people doing the right thing."

Collins offers advice for teenagers (especially girls) who aspire to make it in the business world:

Don't be afraid to fail. "We learn the most through our failures. We can't be so afraid that we don't take the leap. Go for it."

Find your inner circle of support. "No one can do it alone. Figure out the people who can help you—a parent, a teacher, or a store owner—and talk to them."

Listen and ask questions. "You learn the most by doing these two things. If you ask the right questions, your path will open up. Innovation comes when people listen to each other and work toward a mutually exciting goal."




RISK ATTENTION: From her experience in leading the media company Girl Starter (GirlStarter.com), Collins encourages young women and their parents to take more risks when it comes to thinking about how they can be entrepreneurs.

Don't be afraid to change. "If something's not working, make adjustments. People get emotionally attached to an idea. They don't see that it needs to evolve. Adjusting is not a sign of failure."

Have fun. "People do their best when they enjoy what they're doing. The more you put joy and laughter into it, the more you'll want to do it. And work won't feel like work."

Listen to your heart. "Understand why you're doing this and who you're doing it for. Is it for you or someone else?"

Collins says parents can play a vital role in getting children to develop entrepreneurial skills.

"Encourage them to take risks and support them in their journey," she says. "If you're offering constructive feedback, it shouldn't be squelching. Let them be creative. If you're directing it, it doesn't come from them." 

—JIM MANDELARO