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### A Real Fine Story

By *Kay Daly*

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By day, Laura Johansen is a corporate HR executive, guiding personnel through a maze of forms, policies, and benefits packages. But at night, a kind of alchemy occurs, transforming this mild-mannered desk jockey into a latter-day mad scientist. Off goes the suit, on go the gloves and goggles as Laura shifts to her real passion, handcrafting soothing bars of soap from all-natural ingredients for her home-based business, **Real Fine Soap Company**.

The source of Laura's Jekyll-esque trans-mutation? It's not a magic potion or a summoning of dark spirits. Instead, Laura's metamorphosis into a home-based soap mogul is spurred by more benign forces: her own need to create and the nurturing legacies of her mother and grandmother.

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#### The creative urge

Before Laura came to the craft of soap-making, she had plenty of experience with the creative process. Her mother, Joy, is a professional botanical artist, and Laura's lifelong creative outlet has been baking.

When Laura returned to school for a master's degree in counseling, her creative impulses provided a kind of therapy. In her academic program, she regularly worked with counseling clients. But although she was helping them, the work felt frustratingly incomplete. She'd guide her clients along a path to recovery, but never got to see a final product.

To nurture her soul through the process, Laura turned to arts and crafts. She started with pottery, molding beautiful works from formless clay. Later, glycerin soap caught her attention, and she felt convinced she could master the art of making her own bars. "I thought, 'If Martha Stewart could do it, so can I,'" she recalls.

At first, the project seemed a bust. "I got some recipes and took a shot, but it just wasn't that challenging," she explains. She still liked the idea of making soap, but she didn't want shortcuts and pre-fab processes. Where could she learn this time-honored art in its original form?

The answer came from a good friend bearing a book. This friend, a librarian, "has the uncanny ability to talk to you about something you're interested in, then present you with a book about it the next time you see her," Laura says. When Laura told her friend about her interest in soap, she soon found herself with a brand new book on the basics.

Through trial and error, Laura developed her own formula, using all-natural vegetable-based fats, scents, and colors. Her secret recipe? Laura won't tell, but her goal in developing it was to produce a highly emollient bar that babies sensitive skin. "Animal fat produces a very bubbly soap, but I found it's also very drying," Laura explains. She developed her soap using only vegetable fats to produce a milder bar. She also experimented with different natural scents and colors derived from spices and plants to avoid the harsh effects of chemical dyes.

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#### Family inspiration

Laura's newly perfected soap recipe got a big response from friends and family. "At first, I'd just make bars for fun and give them away to friends for holidays and gifts," she recalls. "But, pretty soon friends were nudging me, asking, 'When are you going to make another batch of Gardenia?'"

It didn't take long to see that there was a market for her soap... but still, she felt stalled. Even though her career wasn't totally satisfying, she didn't feel ready to embark on a new path. "There was nothing inside me that would motivate me to start my own business," she recalls.

That changed when her grandmother passed away on Halloween of 2001. "She was a lovely woman," Laura says with a smile. "She didn't fully understand my degree or my career, but she was always very supportive." Laura's grandmother had certain pet phrases she was famous for saying, words that expressed her optimistic, nurturing personality. Whenever Laura felt the stress of her life, her grandmother would tell her to "swing easy." When she expressed doubt about her path in life, her grandmother would say, "Do what you love." And whenever Laura told her something that tickled her fancy, she'd respond, "That's real fine."

Prior to her death, Laura's grandmother went into a week-long coma. During those last days together, Laura thought about her grandmother's philosophy on life. "It made me recognize that human resources was not my true passion," Laura says.

When she told her family and friends that she'd be turning her hobby into a business, everyone was excited. Her boyfriend spearheaded her marketing campaign, building a website and helping develop a business plan. Nearly everyone she knows has helped in some way, with packaging, distribution, and word-of-mouth advertising.

And while she's thankful for all the help she's received, she feels most strongly that her business belongs to the women of her family. "It's really a multi-generational project," Laura explains. Her mother, one of her most avid supporters, lends her talents as a botanical artist by designing the packaging.

And of course, Laura's grandmother remains its guiding light, the spirit that supports and inspires her endeavors. Laura took it as a sign that when her paperwork was filed to establish her business, the filing date was one year to the day after her grandmother's death. "I feel like she's watching me still," Laura says. To commemorate her, Laura named the company for her grandmother's pet phrase of approval: "Real Fine Soap Company."

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#### The technique

For Laura, the reward of making soap is that it requires all the skill and patience she developed in her previous hobby: baking. As with a batch of brownies, it's what you put in and how you combine the ingredients that guarantee a satisfying final product.

But it's also a tedious process, she warns. You have to be precise and patient. "It's all about timing," Laura explains. "You have to be willing to play the waiting game."

The basic components of soap are fat and lye, and to get the proportions correct, Laura uses a postal scale. Next, she must coordinate the combination of ingredients and temperatures with pinpoint accuracy. She starts by melting shortening, which must be brought to precisely 130 degrees. Next, she mixes lye with water. When the water hits the lye, it immediately heats up, bubbling to a frothy boil which must be cooled to exactly 130 degrees.

When both components reach the magical point of 130 degrees, they must be combined, which creates a bit of a coordinational challenge. "The two parts have to be ready at the same time," Laura explains. "If not, it'll be a problem-child bar." Once the soap is scented and colored, it's poured into a molds and left to cure for a month.

The process requires time, focus, patience, and a good deal of space. When you're making soap, that's all you can do. "If my boyfriend comes home and I've got a batch going, he'll say, 'If you're making soap, I can't make dinner.'"

Since the curing process takes so long, Laura almost always has a pretty sizeable stock of soap-to-be hanging around... so much so that she actually had to move to a more spacious apartment. She's also planning to expand her operation with a larger line of products, wider distribution, and product shows that let customers get a hands-on feel for her product.

But she's keeping her day job, and always wants the passion she has for the creative process to remain at the heart of her work. You won't see big advertising plans or a go-go marketing drive. For a while, it'll stay small and personal. "I want the business to grow organically," she explains.

And that's something that her grandmother would say is "real fine."

**Bright Idea:** If you're looking for economically priced but personal gifts, Laura is offering a special line of holiday-themed gift packs that mix and match scents such as Pumpkin Pie, Marzipan, Christmas Spice, Fig, and Citrus Spritzer. To order, visit her site at [www.realfinesoap.com](http://www.realfinesoap.com).

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