

WORKING MOTHER

ENTREPRENEUR MOM - Kristin Shute's Helping Hands

When her husband was laid off, this mom seized the moment and took control of her family's destiny by launching a home-care biz.



As told to: Mary Harvey

My story: Kids always think their moms are invincible. Even as an adult, I didn't realize my own mother was actually mortal until she was diagnosed with cancer in 2001. I was overwhelmed as I discovered just how difficult it is to care for an elderly parent while you manage your own life and family. Suffering through the surgeries, getting her to and from treatments, making sure someone was always there while she recovered—it was all-consuming. And I was one of the lucky ones: I was able to work a short week, and my brothers were all helping. But so many struggle to find the quality home care they

need. I remember thinking, *This shouldn't be so hard. There should be more help, more options.*

That thought stuck with me and resurfaced when my husband, Josh, was laid off in January 2009. I was working part-time in pharmaceutical sales and marketing then, but I had always wanted to run my own business. And I knew what it took: I grew up watching my father run the home heating oil company my great-grandfather had started in 1895. The layoff forced my family to think differently. It was like a door opened and I thought, Now's your chance — go for it.

I had just started the initial research when my husband's former colleague mentioned a friend who owned a home-care franchise. It seemed like fate. Home Helpers, which provides in-home, nonmedical care and companionship to seniors, was exactly the kind of service I wished I'd had access to when my own mother was ill. Josh and I met with the company's CEO and some other franchise owners, and they all had a passion for caring — which is what ultimately sold me. The franchise fees were reasonable, and we budgeted for start-up costs. We knew we'd have to put out a lot of money the first couple of years, which meant no vacations and fewer meals out. By June I was doing a weeklong training session; by September I was licensed. I had clients right away, so it became very real very fast.

And very exciting! When it's your own business, it's easier to put your blood, sweat and tears into it. But it's a constant juggling act: I work days, nights and weekends, sometimes 50 to 100 hours a week. My husband (who found a new full-time job) picks up where I leave off, and vice versa. I couldn't do this without him. Luckily, I found an office that's close to both my home and my children's preschool, so I go back and forth a lot. I can be with the kids in a heartbeat — definitely a plus of being my own boss. I have a deeper appreciation now for the time I spend with my family. I enjoy the little things—the funny comments and acts of kindness — and I don't sweat the small stuff. We're less organized, dinner's not always on the table on time, and we've learned to live with a few dust bunnies. "Life is about risks," my father always told me. This is one risk we know was worth it.

Lessons Learned

1. Look for growing markets. Demand for senior care is rising, despite today's financial climate. Seek opportunities with growth potential, markets that can weather economic storms.
2. Don't skimp on the research. Talk to everyone you can in your industry. Ask lots of questions. Get a feel for what the business will entail day to day.
3. Embrace uncertainty. Some things work themselves out as you go. Don't worry about the what-ifs — that will paralyze you.
4. Take time for yourself. Keep up your personal interests. I play tennis and hike. This rejuvenates me, and the whole family benefits.

Kristin Shute, 36, mother of Pierson, 5, and Morgan, 3; president and owner of Home Helpers, Allendale, NJ, one of more than 500 franchise offices in North America. Number of employees: 19.