

# Entrepreneur Taps Personal Experience in New Venture

## RETAIL: Survivor Eyes targets cancer patients, others

■ By SUBRINA HUDSON

Lisa Brambilla-Doble started eyebrow makeup company **Survivor Eyes Inc.** to help her friend **Laurie Nalezny** cope with losing her eyebrows to chemotherapy for breast cancer.

The Yorba Linda-based brand is carried online at **Costco**, **Walmart** and **Amazon** less than two years after launching. Its next goal is to be featured on television shopping channels like **QVC**, and it will introduce a product for children this year.

Brambilla-Doble said she understood Nalezny's frustration—she survived breast cancer, too—and felt there was a bigger market for her product. The company's main target is the cancer patient population, but it's also developing products for those who've lost brow hair due to other conditions.



**Brambilla-Doble: Survivor Eyes founder**

"[Laurie] said, 'You've got to help me. I've got a 13 year old with a Sharpie who wants to help me, and I'm terrified of what she's going to do,'" Brambilla-Doble said. "Having gone through breast cancer myself, I knew how important it was for me to walk out the front door and look like my normal self and not like a cancer patient."

She's been cancer-free since 2010 and able to focus her energies on her business ideas.

The Survivor Eyes kit includes a makeup palette with three colors, 10 eyebrow stencils

and a dual-sided applicator brush. The customer holds the stencil against his or her brow, then apply the eyebrow color with the applicator brush.

The company sold 2,800 kits last year and projects it will double that, thanks to its deal with Walmart and Amazon that was signed in December. Sales were nearly \$55,000 last year, Brambilla-Doble said.

The makeup industry is certainly giving brows the red-carpet treatment. San Francisco-based company **Benefit Cosmetics** announced last year that it would introduce a menu of brow services at its stores. The category makes up more than a third of its business. Irvine-based **Billion Dollar Brows** took in an estimated \$10 million last year, according to the Business Journal's 2017 list of women-owned businesses.

Even investors are taking notice. Rumors circulated last month that brow-service-turned-makeup-brand **Anastasia Beverly Hills** is considering bids from private equity firms and companies such as **Unilever** and **Estee Lauder Cos. Inc.** that could value the business at more than \$2.5 billion, Women's Wear Daily reported.

Survivor Eyes is facing stiff competition from established mass market and luxury beauty brands, such as **Maybelline** and **Dior**. But Brambilla-Doble said she's undeterred because many brow products don't target women and men who've suffered hair loss from chemotherapy or diseases, such as skin condi-

**Kit: stencils and color help customers fashion eyebrows after losing hair**



tion alopecia. She also said the product is for customers inexperienced with eyebrow application, unlike Benefit or Anastasia, brands popular with makeup-savvy millennials and Generation Z.

### Staying Put

Brambilla-Doble partnered with cosmetics maker **Sorme Cosmetics** in 2015. The manufacturer develops high-grade professional makeup for makeup artists and skincare professionals. She enlisted friend and makeup artist **Kathie Condon** to help design the applicator brush and stencil shapes. The stencils received a patent last year.

The entrepreneur said she invested more than \$250,000 of her own money to launch the business. She hit a wall when she ran out of operating capital—pointing to her push to send the kits to beauty influencers and the donation of 500 kits to the nonprofit **Look Good Feel Better Foundation**, which helps cancer patients with personal care. But she soon received a sizable inheritance from her aunt **Dorothy Brambilla**, who died in 2015.

The \$32.95 brow kits launched in October 2016 during a KTLA television beauty segment with host **Stacy Cox**. It was available at Costco

six months later.

"When we launched in Costco, [the buyer] said, 'You have a minimum sales per month that you have to meet, and we blew [past] the minimum in the first week.'" Brambilla-Doble said. "You can't really tap into a better consumer base than the Costco member. You're talking about blue ocean fishing."

She projects the company will be profitable in five years.

Last year, it launched waterproof and sweat-proof eyebrow kits for men and women called **Brows for Bros** and **Forever Brows**, respectively.

Brambilla-Doble is working on trademarking the name of the new kids brow kit. She said she plans to donate about 50% of the kit's sales to **Ronald McDonald House Charities** and **St. Jude Children's Research Hospital**.

Survivor Eyes is the second venture for Brambilla-Doble, who founded Yorba Linda-based **BioUrn** in 2013.

The dog lover was working as a pet insurance representative when she was diagnosed with cancer in 2008. After recovering in 2010, she sought to return to work but said she was told her position had been filled. Meanwhile, her father-in-law asked her to make plans to spread his ashes in a redwood forest when he died, and the idea for BioUrn occurred to her.

The company makes biodegradable pet urns. The urn holds a seed that grows into a plant of the customer's choosing, serving as a living memorial. She said she partners with funeral homes and veterinarian offices that offer the urns to customers.

"The most rewarding thing for an entrepreneur is knowing that your product has touched somebody's heart and solved a problem, and to have [created] two products that do that makes me swell with pride." ■