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# Salem-area T-shirt maker takes on hurtful issues

by Laura Oppenheimer, The Oregonian

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Like many people launching a business, Tammi Burns talked to her family about sacrifices. "We will have no life. We will have no money," she warned her husband, Jim. "Are we strong enough to handle this?"

Unlike most entrepreneurs, she'd also face personal demons if she followed her dream: selling T-shirts that fight social problems such as addiction and domestic violence. As a survivor of physical and verbal abuse, Burns knew she'd relive her past by connecting with customers.

But she was ready.

Three years ago, Break the Chain Apparel debuted shirts that combine a rock 'n' roll look with socially conscious messages. Burns says she's close to making a profit this year -- but that's not the focus of her Salem-area business.

"It's not about becoming famous or super-wealthy or anything like that. It's about this," Burns says, pointing to a shirt with the words "Love is not black and blue."

Tammi and Jim Burns met almost a decade ago, as co-workers at Power Chevrolet in Sublimity.

She had left behind a string of abusive relationships but says she was still bitter and distrustful, still a victim. He grew up in a family of happy marriages, naive about domestic violence.

They hit it off and started dating. "He just held my hand. He was so calm," Tammi Burns says. "I thought, 'I can't date this guy. He's too nice.' I was used to having a lot of drama."

She went to counseling, learned to love a relationship that simply felt comfortable. Tammi and Jim became each other's best friends.

The couple got married almost six years ago and built a life in Lyons, a small town on the route between Salem and Bend. The youngest of Tammi's three daughters just finished high school. The Burnses also have three Labradors, and they've hosted four Japanese exchange students.



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Tammi Burns, owner of Break the Chain Apparel, sells socially conscious shirts at the Wine, Chocolate & More festival in Rickreall. T-shirts retail for \$18. "People can speak without saying a word," Burns says. "Why not say something by simply getting dressed?"

Tammi Burns always wanted to fight domestic violence, but she didn't know how until a series of serendipitous meetings and brainstorming sessions spelled it out.

As a fleet sales representative at the car dealership, Burns mentioned to a customer that she had run a clothing line during the 1990s.

"What was it?" he asked.

"You've probably never heard of it, but it was called No Violence" -- a project inspired by a drive-by shooting, but derailed because she lacked a trademark.



"What are you doing selling cars?" the customer asked. He remembered the shirts and wanted to help revive them.

She decided to make the idea bigger than a single issue, take on all kinds of problems that hurt families and communities. When she came up with a name, Break the Chain Apparel, Burns raced to her computer to see whether anybody had the trademark. Nope, it was available. "This is a sign," she thought.

Burns enlisted an intellectual-property lawyer to finalize the deal, expecting a quick, routine appointment. But the attorney did something unusual: She revealed that she was getting out of an abusive marriage. The two became fast friends.

At first, Burns tried to do everything herself. She designed T-shirts, arranged printing, sold them from the back of her truck, all while working full time.

Nervous, Burns called her old friend Dave Adamson with Church Art Works, who had helped design her first clothing venture. He and his staff plunged in, helping revamp Break the Chain's logo and shirts. Now, Burns specializes in concepts and slogans; Church Art Works brings them to life.

One shirt forms a skull from the words "Meth equals death"; another asks, "What's in your closet?" One of Burns' favorites implores people to "make a stand against an angry hand."

Last fall, Burns was the first to go through an intensive case study with the board of GROW North Santiam, a nonprofit business counseling group.

"We work with people who are really passionate about what they're doing. Tammi has that kind of passion in spades," says Allison McKenzie, GROW's enterprise facilitator.

But, she says, "People tend to gravitate to things they love about their business"-- and neglect the rest. In Burns' case, finances weren't getting as much attention as they needed. With help from GROW, Burns hired people to manage money and bolster her marketing.

Jim Burns -- aka "the inventory gestapo" -- keeps merchandise organized in a trailer, and Tammi sells shirts on her Web site, [breakthechainapparel.com](http://breakthechainapparel.com), and at festivals.

Burns likes to sav. "Go big or go home." which explains her swelling number of projects.

She tries to volunteer money or time for charity every month. Once, she and Jim marshaled a crew of 15 to help organize a crisis center and connect the staff with community resources.

This summer, Break the Chain will team up with Oregon's Sexual Assault Task Force to stage a youth T-shirt design contest, aimed at preventing sexual violence and promoting healthy relationships.

And two ongoing spinoffs will move forward.

The official Break the Chain song will get more exposure this fall. Years ago, Burns wrote lyrics about moving on from an abusive relationship. She finally found the perfect musical partner in Jon Chinburg, a Salem social studies teacher at Adam Stephens Middle School by day and rock musician by night.

When he read the lyrics, Chinburg says, he was floored. "I told her, 'I don't know if I can write a song strong enough.'"

With the help of his nephew, also a musician, Chinburg crafted the right notes. He recorded the song with his band, the FlexTones. It plays on Break the Chain's Web site and will be on an album that Chinburg plans to release this fall.

Last summer, longtime friend Kimberly Garlock suggested bringing Break the Chain to schools -- starting with Adam Stephens Middle School, where she teaches industrial technology and art.

That brainstorm developed into Project Change Reaction, which allows schools to host a T-shirt design contest centered on a timely issue (teen drinking, say, or self-esteem). Burns' team perfects the winning concept, sponsors pay for the shirts and the school sells them as fundraisers.

During a Project Change Reaction assembly at Stephens, Garlock told the school that she was physically and verbally abused as a child. For months, students she'd never even taught confided in her about their home life.

That's the power of Break the Chain, Garlock says of her friend's company. "She says it's not her, that it's the Lord working through her. But I have not seen her teeter at all. It's just full-force enthusiasm, belief in what she's doing."

*Laura Oppenheimer,*  
[loppenheimer@news.oregonian.com](mailto:loppenheimer@news.oregonian.com)