

NURTURING TALENT

Peruvian-born Ysabel Li-Lopez is living her dream as a busy entrepreneur, professional and mom!

BY LISA EVANS



Ysabel Li-Lopez designed a top that allows breastfeeding moms to nurse their babies discreetly.

Ysabel Li-Lopez is a born entrepreneur. When she opened her first business at the age of 17 in Peru — a clothing company for women in their late teens and early 20s — the Peruvian native knew she would always find a way to turn her passions into profits. Today, the mom of two is the winner of the City of Ottawa's 2013 Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year Award for her innovative nursing apparel company. Li-Lopez has not only succeeded in building her company, but uses her expertise to help others who dream of becoming entrepreneurs in her full-time job as a business consultant for the YMCA.

Since visiting Vancouver in 2002 for a five-month English immersion program, Li-Lopez dreamed of making Canada her home. "I fell in love with the place and the people. I went back to Peru and said I really want to work and live in Canada," she says. Her dream came true in 2006 when her husband received a work opportunity in Canada. "I basically followed him here," she laughs.

Her background in business administration helped her land a job at the YMCA in Ottawa only 15 days after receiving her permanent residency, and, within a year, she had moved into her current position as a business consultant.

While Li-Lopez dreamed of starting up her own company again, it wasn't until the birth of her now three-year-old son that she found her niche. Li-Lopez faced a common problem shared by many new moms. Armed with the knowledge of the health benefits of breastfeeding (including the baby's lower risk of developing allergies, obesity and certain cancers), Li-Lopez knew she wanted to breastfeed, but many of the nursing tops she tried weren't discreet enough to allow for comfortable nursing in public.

"I always had to hide myself from others or go to private rooms," she says of her experiences breastfeeding with traditional nursing tops. Plus, these tops were far too casual for her taste. "You could only really dress them with jeans or with leggings," she says. "I wanted something that I could wear to meetings with my clients or go with friends to a party and use another type of bottom like a nice skirt, not only jeans."

Li-Lopez sent her designs to suppliers she knew in Peru who made the samples and she tested them for six months in Canada. She put them through the washer and dryer to make sure they could hold up and ensured the material, which contains some spandex, could adjust to a woman's post-pregnancy body as it changes.

The tops attracted the attention of local Ottawa moms. "I was going to playgroups and I was getting comments from other moms who really liked what I had and they asked where did you buy it, and I said it was my design," she recalls. The interest made Li-Lopez realize she had something special and she placed a small order with her Peruvian suppliers to test the market.

Li-Lopez launched Nurture-Elle Apparel in 2010, at a time when public breastfeeding became a topic of controversy in the Canadian media with many stories of women being asked to take breastfeeding out of public arenas. In 2012, for example, an Ontario woman was asked to leave a daycare centre when she pulled out her breast to nurse her infant son. The situation sparked outrage amongst moms; some of whom agreed with the daycare's position that children should be sheltered from seeing a woman's breast, while others claimed breastfeeding was a natural and beautiful image of the close bond between a mother and her baby.

Being from a culture where baby formula is prohibitively expensive for the majority of the population, breastfeeding was the norm for Li-Lopez. "Nobody [in Peru] cares about taking the boob out and breastfeeding," she says. But, she wanted a top that would allow her to discreetly nurse her children in public while allowing a private bonding moment with her new baby. While at first glance, Nurture-Elle's nursing tops look like regular tops, they have a layered opening

that is hidden by the baby's head when he or she is nursing. "You really don't see that the baby is breastfeeding," says Li-Lopez. She laughs when she tells the story of a time she was breastfeeding her youngest child in Wal-Mart and a man commented on how peaceful her sleeping daughter appeared. "He didn't know I was breastfeeding. It just looked like she was sleeping in my arms," she laughs.

Since launching Nurture-Elle, Li-Lopez has received a great deal of support from Canadian businesses that support mompreneurs. Her fashionable nursing tops are now sold in 40 stores across Canada and the United States, and online at nurture-elle.com.

Incorporating her home country into the business was important for Li-Lopez. Peruvian textiles are known worldwide as being of superb quality, but Li-Lopez had another reason for manufacturing her clothing in Peru. "We wanted to be a socially conscious company," she says. Nurture-Elle's garment suppliers are small companies led by women entrepreneurs, many of whom are single moms and the only financial support to their families. Li-Lopez speaks of one supplier, who was diagnosed with breast cancer when her now three-year-old son was only two months old. "I want to

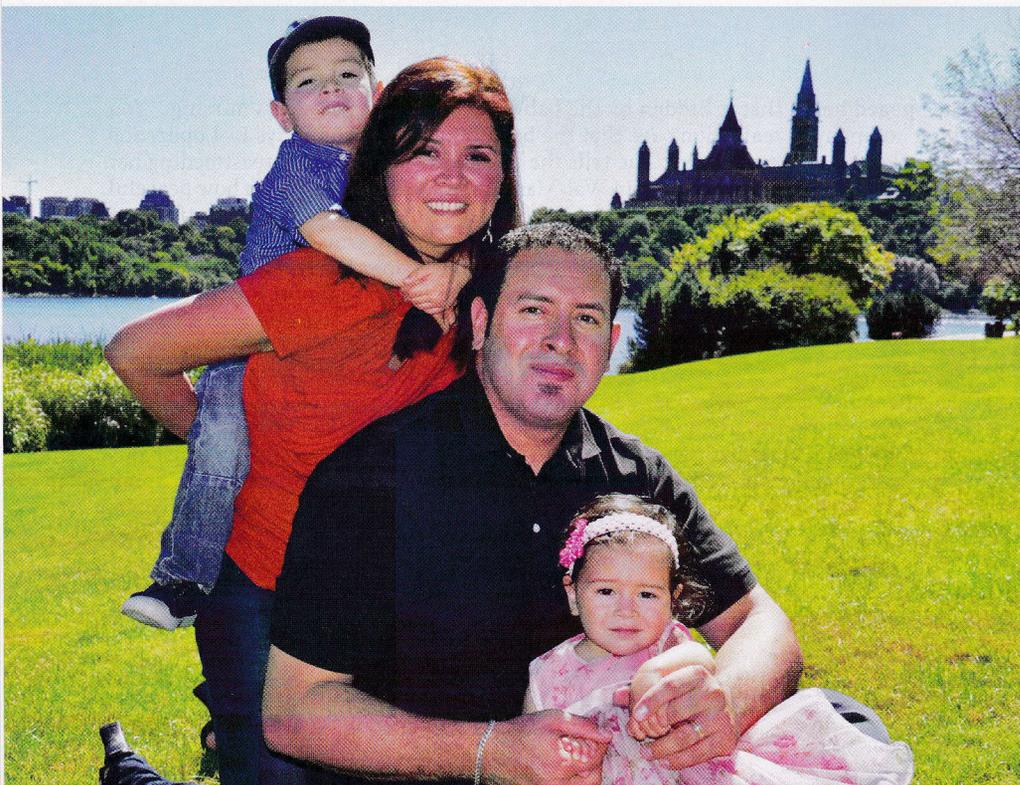
 When you love what you do, you are willing to invest your time and energy. Lucky for me, this is my dream job."

know that I'm helping her family," she says of her socially conscious business model. "These women also hire other women who are at risk, so it's creating a chain of support. When you give money to a woman, that money goes directly to the family to feed the kids," she says.

This year, Li-Lopez has plans to extend this socially conscious model to support Canadian immigrants by making a Made in Canada line with EcoEquitable; a Canadian charity that provides temporary employment and skills development training through sewing projects that allow immigrant women to transition to sustainable fiscal independence. The Made in Canada line will help Nurture-Elle Apparel gain access to stores that support Canadian-made products while helping immigrant women at the same time.

Balancing the demands of a growing business with a full-time job and raising a family may sound like an impossible juggling act, but Li-Lopez says she thrives in the chaos. "I always did two things at a time," she jokes, referring to running her first women's apparel business while studying at the University of Lima and running her

SUCCESS STORY



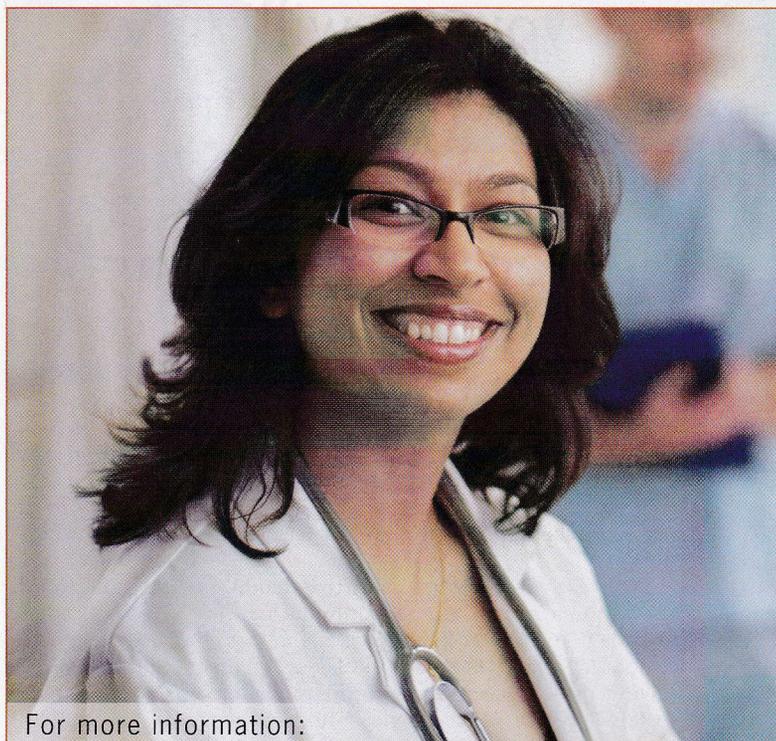
Ysabel Li-Lopez with her husband, Andres Lopez, and their two children, Oliver and Camila.

second, a baby clothing company, while working full time at Coca-Cola in Peru.

While being an entrepreneur and working in a full-time job are often pitted against each other, Li-Lopez says her business and her job complement one another. "This job requires someone who not only has the theory, but the practical side [of running a business]. I'm passing on my experience to my clients," she says. Being an entrepreneur herself means Li-Lopez can relate to the challenges faced by many of those she counsels.

Being a business owner and a mom, for example, is a challenge faced by many of Li-Lopez's clients, but for her, she says it simply requires a commitment to prioritize what really matters. "I always tell clients and friends, don't call me between five and nine at night," she says. After picking up her kids at five o'clock, it's family time, but once nine o'clock hits and the kids are in bed, she can be found in her basement office working on Nurture-Elle.

Although the days can be hectic, Li-Lopez says she wouldn't have it any other way. "When you love what you do, you are willing to invest your time and energy. Lucky for me, this is my dream job, to be a business owner," she says. 🌻



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