

Pass It On®...

The Mistakes we Make can Become our Greatest Success.

Bette Nesmith Graham was an underpaid secretary, single mom and mother of invention. She started her company, Liquid Paper, in her kitchen, and sold it 21 years later for \$48 million. But as part of her lasting legacy, she also pioneered childcare in the workplace, Zen gardens at the office and a continuing education program for employees.

In 1951, Bette Nesmith (later Graham) found herself divorced and raising a curious child, Michael. She got a job as a bank secretary, which, in those days, meant mostly typing documents and contracts. She worked hard but was never a perfect typist. The state-of-the-art typewriter, the IBM electric, had no way of redacting mistakes. One typo meant starting over.

Frustrated by the waste of time, Graham started looking for a solution. Type slower? Practice more? Neither did the trick. Then, one day, while painting a holiday design on the bank window, she got an idea: Why not paint over typos with a miniature brush and paint that matches the document's color?

Graham went home and began mixing tempera paint with water in the blender. She packaged her formula in empty nail polish jars and tried it out at work. It saved her so much time that her coworkers began asking for their own bottles. She created a label with the name "Mistake Out" and began selling it.

It wasn't long before Graham was selling 100 bottles a month. Then a large order came in from General Electric, and her business exploded. She renamed the business Liquid Paper and recruited her young son and his friends to help out by filling small bottles and packaging product.

As the business continued to grow, Graham became CEO and outsourced manufacturing, with factories in Brussels and Toronto. And then she had another innovative idea: Believing women were more natural nurturers and could run companies in a more human way, she established an on-site day care for employees and created a generous pension plan and a continuing education program.

She also believed all people should have the opportunity to better themselves. To aid in that goal, she established the Betty Clair McMurray Foundation in 1976 to aid disadvantaged women and the Gihon Foundation in 1978 to further women's efforts in business and the arts.

After 20 years, Graham sold Liquid Paper to the Gillette Corporation for \$48 million in 1979. A year later, she died at age 56 after experiencing a stroke.

The story might end there, except for that curious boy, named Michael, who filled tiny bottles with product and helped his mother package and ship them. Having learned to work hard from his mother, he joined the Air Force. When that didn't work out, he studied music, formed a band and recorded songs at a local studio. The producer liked what he heard and told Michael about an upcoming audition for a TV show. Michael gave it a try, and a few songs later, he was performing as Michael Nesmith with The Monkees — carrying on his mother's tradition of innovation and persistence. He also inherited his mother's fortune and continued contributing to causes to help women succeed.

It is said that luck just seems to find some people. For Bette Nesmith Graham and her son Michael, it was work that created the luck they were looking for.

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