



TECH STAR



Judith Katz: Securing Safety and Success through Technology

[By Akbar Ali]

As CEO of award-winning biometric software solutions developer Count Me In, LLC, Judith Katz is an expert in many fields, including technology, software development, and business management, to name just a few. Though she began her career as an educator, Katz soon branched out into the technology industry through a series of innovative products she believed were necessary to enhance workplace security and efficiency. Ultimately, this would pave the way for Katz and her husband, inventor and software developer Norman Katz, to launch their own company in Count Me In, which furthered their pioneering work in fingerprint-based software solutions.

Katz's professional transition into the technology industry was prompted not by her desire to advance the field during its nascent stages in the 1970s, but by a more pressing need to bolster public safety at a time when violence in and around schools was becoming a widespread dilemma with no apparent remedy.

"As the administrator and owner of four Minee Subee Early Education and Childcare Centers in Chicago's Northwest suburbs, I was increasingly concerned about the safety and welfare of our young students and of our staff," she recalls. "Since founding the schools in 1974, violent incidents on school properties were occurring with alarming frequency. Like most early education centers, we operated with an "open door" policy, and though we monitored the entry of all visitors, the reality is that once a dangerous individual is inside, there's little anyone can do. I was determined to implement some type of security mechanism that would limit our risk [due] to these types of threats."

Her decision was also impacted by an infamous school shooting two decades ago, an incident which demanded that locals become increasingly involved in bolstering the security of their community.

"While my late husband Norm and I were growing increasingly concerned about security provisions at our and all child-

centered institutions, our true 'wake-up call' came in 1988 when tragedy struck all too close to home. On May 20 of that year, Laurie Dann, a mentally ill woman, simply walked into Hubbard Woods Elementary School in Winnetka, an affluent suburb on Chicago's North Shore, toting several guns and engaged in a shooting rampage that critically wounded five people and killed an eight-year-old boy. We grieved along with the rest of Chicago and the nation and acknowledged

that it was a 'there but for the grace of God go I' situation. We were unwilling to accept such risk and determined to prevent similar tragedies from occurring at our facilities."

Katz's pursuit of a career in education took her to Chicago's Roosevelt University where she belonged to a sorority. She describes her time there as "a wonderful academic experience." Soon she would transition from student to educator, a position through which she could fulfill her desire to teach children and to shape their futures.

"I have always been interested in the academic and emotional nurturing of children, so I pursued a career in education. After working in the field for several years, I decided to open my own center in 1974. The original Minee Subee, which we named in honor of our own children (Michele, Neal, Sue, and Beth), was a small storefront licensed for a capacity of 45. Since then, it has evolved into four state-of-the-art facilities that provide more than 700 children across Chicago's Northwest suburbs with nationally acclaimed, accredited programs."

Katz's husband would also prove to be pivotal in shaping her entry into the technology world where, together, they combined his expertise with her passions.

"My late husband Norm was a brilliant inventor with a strong interest in technology that led him to become a software developer.

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. Travel — Aruba is my favorite.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. Billy Joel.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. *People*.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. *Grey's Anatomy*.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. My father.

Q. What makes you laugh?

A. People — I love to watch people. I love to not make fun, but to laugh with them.



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After the incident at Hubbard Woods Elementary, we both applied our individual talents to create a keyless entry system that would prevent unwanted strangers from gaining access to our schools.”

The products they were able to develop and introduce to the market helped establish Katz and her husband as pioneers in their field, bringing not only professional success but a wide array of opportunities to build on their innovations.

“It was my goal to provide the finest equipment and programs and to create a learning environment second to none — even when that meant personally designing and developing them. Such is the case with Door Monitor, our facility-access control system. In its early stages, Door Monitor was a PC-based, keyless entry software application that utilized swipe cards as identification credentials. But, because cards can be lost, stolen, and shared, we explored more advanced technologies that would offer greater control and, hence, security.

“We were pioneers exploring and adapting biometric recognition technology. We partnered with Digital Persona for their sensing devices, and Norm, with his exceptional ingenuity, took the software to the next level by eliminating a need for accessories, such as cards and PINs (personal identification numbers). Instead of requiring the system to ‘know’ who an individual is (based on a PIN code or coded card) before it could verify identity, our proprietary software could identify enrolled individuals exclusively from their fingerprints...This makes the act of ‘buddy punching’ — when one individual signs in for another — obsolete.

“With Door Monitor, only pre-authorized parents and staff are able to enter our

facilities. We knew that there could be other universal applications for our proprietary technology. Shortly thereafter, we integrated it with a timecard module, which enables the ability to monitor and manage employee time and attendance. With Door Monitor and its companion product, Timecard Monitor, we have the ability to control and manage facility-access and time and attendance, simply by having preauthorized individuals tap a fingerprint sensor.”

The Katzes launched their own company, Count Me In, LLC, in 2001 with the distinct purpose of marketing their software solutions specifically to childcare centers. What they soon discovered was that other businesses found their products equally appealing, and thus, the demand for their innovations was tremendous. Unfortunately, their sharing of success would be short-lived, forcing Katz to direct the company into the future and to ensure its continued expansion.

“Though I’d always been involved with Count Me In, after the sudden death of Norm in 2002, I stepped up to the helm and assumed full responsibility as president and CEO.”

Katz has found herself more than able to meet the challenge, guiding the company into a new era of success and recognition which has come with a large number of industry accolades.

“Since 2002, Count Me In and Minee Subee (in part, because of the advanced technologies we provide) have won kudos from both the industry and the media. Our Timecard Monitor has repeatedly been named ‘Product of the Year’ by *BiometriTech* and *Small Business Technology*. Pitney Bowes’ *Priority Magazine* named us the ‘Best Small Business Technology of 2004,’ and we were a finalist in the prestigious Software

& Information Industry Association’s CODiE Awards.

“We’ve also been awarded Gold status in the Intuit Developers Network, named a finalist for Chicago’s Loyola University Family Business of the Year, and honored as an inductee into the Chicagoland Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame. Also noteworthy is that from a fledgling business launched only seven years ago, Count Me In today has a global clientele on five continents, serving thousands of businesses in virtually every industry.”

Despite her success in both education and technology, Katz claims that her greatest teacher has not been her formal training, but the daily experiences of life which have helped her develop cutting-edge solutions where previously none existed.

“Experience has been my greatest teacher. I have been in the early childhood field since I was 16 years old and learned a great deal from the Bluebird schools, which no longer exist. Through experience and life lessons, I’ve learned that when an adequate solution does not exist, the answer often lies within, and that with creativity and dedication, one can create solutions.”

She also acknowledges the due influence of others in her success, though one figure rightly stands above the rest.

“I must credit my late husband Norm as one of my most influential colleagues. His spirit, vision, and ingenuity led to so many exceptional developments and impressed upon me the value of going out on a limb to create solutions to problems when ready-made ones do not exist.”

Aspiring technology professionals can take heart from Katz, who, despite no formal



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technology training, has made an impact on the industry which is as impressive as it is unexpected. But her advice to the aspiring techie is to look beyond the usual confines of inspiration, just as she has done her entire career.

“I would emphasize to young people the importance of recognizing that schools simply do not and cannot teach everything one needs to know. It’s important to get out and experience different occupations in order to grow. In every position you will learn

valuable things to take with you, and that will help you be better at what you do today and in the future. Life is an ongoing learning experience.”

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