

## The Gift of Gab:

# Orinda Resident's Creative Question Cards Spark Conversations

By Jennifer Wake

Nearly everyone has had an idea for a product or service at one time or another. But only those who take the idea from concept to product can truly call themselves entrepreneurs.

Orinda resident Cristy Clarke has always been quick to come up with new business ideas. In 2002, on the way to a dinner party with her husband, she thought it would be a good idea to jot down some questions to help the conversation along. The response was so positive, she knew she had a good idea. Soon after, she developed a prototype and began extensive research on production and importation.

In 2004 Clarke founded TableTopics, selling small acrylic lacquer boxes filled with a stack of 135 "conversation starter" cards, each with a question on the back. Questions range from "If you could give all human beings one virtue, which would you choose?" to "What do you think is the ideal age?" There are specialized versions with questions for family, teens, couples, golfers and even sets for those following Election 2008.

Now available at more than 1,800 retailers in the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, sales of the unique cards reached approximately \$3 million last year. Yet it wasn't the first business venture for Clarke.

As a college student, she started a typing business where she would type term papers for desperate college students who would come by the night before a paper was due. "I'd charge them an arm and a leg," Clarke said. "They'd pay it and I'd type their paper all night."

After college, she started a company likened to a fast food caterer called Just Hors d'Oeuvres in Lafayette, but sold the business when she started her family. Clarke stayed home with her children for the next 10 years, letting her ideas "percolate." But she never lost sight of starting another business. TableTopics was a perfect fit.

"I thought it would be great to have questions on the table – at dinner, at cocktail parties. And with the Internet, I could work from home," Clarke said. "It's been a huge growth experience going from a service to a product, but it's why I went with the TableTopics idea. In the service industry, I was limited by time – and food was rotting in my garage."

After starting TableTopics, the Clarke family garage morphed into a clearing house where Clarke's three daughters, Kelly, 15, Kate, 14, and Lily, 11, filled orders from the online store they developed.

"The girls had a lot of ideas, and told me we should sell it online," Clarke said. "I said, 'Go for it.' They started the Web site targeting Christmas 2005, and got it up and online in October [of that year] through Yahoo store. One of the girls did all the order processing, while the others boxed up and shipped out."

Clarke said they started getting 30 to 40 orders a day, and in the month

of January 2006 they packed 1,000 orders. "They lasted until about April, and then I had to send it down to a fulfillment house," Clarke said.

"It was so much fun seeing them in the garage filling the orders, but they would have had to quit school to continue," she added, laughing.

Recently, Clarke began to miss the extra time she had with her daughters before the success of TableTopics and considered selling it. Her girls said no. "When I talk about selling the business, they're the ones that say don't do it."

"They've really become part of this and see the value of this experience. It's not the money or the number of stores we're in," Clarke said. "The real value for me, as a mom, is that at some point in our lives we can stop growing. They've seen that if you get out of your comfort zone, it's amazing what it gives you personally."

For information about TableTopics, you can visit their Web site at: [www.tabletopics.com](http://www.tabletopics.com).

