



For the theme of family this November, we wanted to draw your attention to women who have helped dress women when they were in a “family way.” Did you know that before the early 1900s, ‘proper’ women could not be seen in public when they were pregnant? We are talking here about middle class and upper class women, whose clothing was made for them by private seamstresses or family servants. Not surprisingly, there were no commercially available maternity clothes. Working class women, who did work throughout their pregnancy, ‘made do’ with larger size clothing or men’s overshirts topping their regular skirts and tops.

Early in the twentieth century, Lena Bryant set out to change that situation. Later,



Rebecca Mathias would ensure that pregnant professional women had suitable business attire to wear to work. We know you will enjoy reading about their stories.

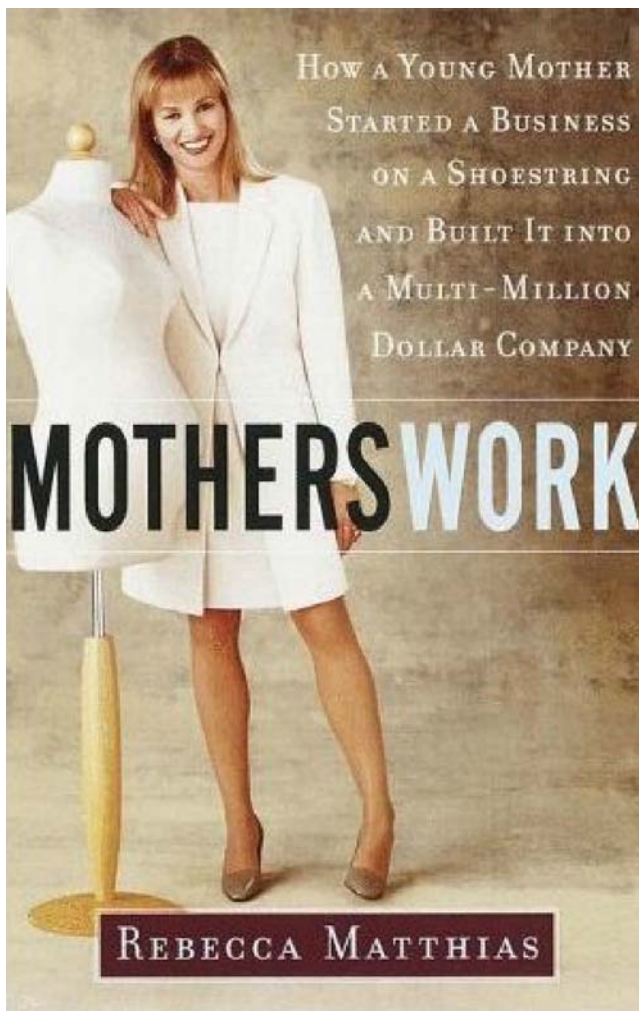
In 1895, sixteen-year-old Lena Himmelstein immigrated from Lithuania and arrived in New York City. She supported herself as a seamstress until her marriage to David Bryant. After his sudden death, she supported herself through seamstress work in her apartment. This was not an uncommon way for women to make a living at that time. By 1904, her dressmaking business was so successful that **Lena Bryant** opened a shop with the living quarters in the rear. When she went to get a bank

loan, the loan officer spelled her name incorrectly. Thus was born the name for her shop, Lane Bryant. (We know you will delight in telling others that name change story!)

An entrepreneur and constant innovator, Bryant developed the first commercial maternity dress. At the request of a customer, who asked for a “presentable but comfortable” maternity dress, Bryant developed a dress with an elasticized waistband and accordion-pleated skirt. This allowed proper women to appear in public and also provided clothing for poorer women who had to work to support themselves and their families. The maternity dress became the best-selling garment in her store.

By 1911, the store was quite successful, but its growth prospects were limited because newspapers were unwilling to accept advertisements for maternity clothing. Such topics were not deemed suitable (they were considered LEWD)! To deal with the newspaper situation, Lena and her second husband and business partner, Albert Malsin, developed the first mail order catalogue for maternity clothing. By 1917, mail-order sales revenues for the company exceeded \$1 million. By 1950, Lane Bryant’s mail order sales made it the sixth-largest mail order retailer in the U.S.

Bryant Malsin then turned to clothing for full-figured women. Before World War I, no mass manufacturer of women’s clothing addressed this market. Bryant Malsin measured over 4,000 women who came to her store and she analyzed the statistics gathered on thousands more. She determined that there were three general types



of stout women and she designed clothes to fit each type. By 1923, company sales had reached \$5 million and sales of full-figured clothing were in excess of sales of maternity wear.

Bryant Malsin was also a pioneer in employee benefits, customer relations and corporate philanthropy. By 1950, her employees participated in profit sharing, pension, disability, group life insurance plans and fully reimbursed physician's visits and hospitalizations. At her suggestion, Lane Bryant worked with the Red Cross to replace any customer's wardrobe that was destroyed in a disaster. After World War II, Lane Bryant worked to clothe displaced persons in Europe.

Fast forward to 1982. **Rebecca Matthias**, an architect, was pregnant and couldn't find any professional clothing that she could wear to work at her firm. The clothing that was commercially available often featured tent dresses with bows or ruffles, and garish buttons. She

was not comfortable with those styles and, in addition, she wanted to start a business that she could run from home after she had her baby. Sensing a business niche, she developed maternity clothing that professional women could wear to work. She sold them through a mail-order catalog.

Matthias started with \$10,000 – \$3,000 for ads, \$3,000 to produce the catalog, and \$3,000 for clothes. She learned by doing. Originally, she placed one-inch ads in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* – and people responded to those ads by asking for her catalog. She also learned by listening to her customers.

Her husband eventually became her business partner and the business transitioned from mail order to bricks and mortar locations. They faced many challenges in the early years and even moved in with her parents for a while. Her father pitched in with the business when she had back surgery and her mother watched the children. Neither she nor her husband took a salary for three years. But their idea addressed a market need and their persistence paid off.

By 2008, Mothers Work had over 1,500 stores and sales of over \$600 million. Matthias served as President from 1982 until 2010, and Chief Operating Officer from 1993 until 2007. Today, Mothers Work owns maternity-wear chains A Pea in the Pod, Mimi Maternity and Motherhood Maternity. Matthias says that the competition

always drives her to come up with better ideas and better products.

We have often talked about the persistence of the many women who came before us. Bryant and Matthias certainly share that quality. We are pleased to stand on the shoulders of these women and salute their entrepreneurial spirit and accomplishments.



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Charlotte S. Waisman, PhD, co-author of *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America* (HarperCollins), is a national champion and advocate for women as a professor and keynote speaker. As an executive coach, Waisman coauthored *50 Activities for Developing Leaders* and *The Leadership Training Activity Book*. She is a principal with a consulting company specializing in leadership and workforce excellence initiatives.

Jill S. Tietjen, PE, co-author of *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America* (HarperCollins), is an author, speaker and electrical engineer. Her other books include the *Setting the Record Straight* series. Tietjen is a top historian on scientific and technical women. She is President/CEO of *Technically Speaking*, a consulting company that specializes in improving career opportunities for women in technology.

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