

> **JORDAN WHELAN**



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Jordan Whelan has launched three companies in the past year, including Our Paper Life, which creates cardboard furniture to be used for marketing purposes. Clients include the Pan Ams.

Fearless young entrepreneur a triple threat

Biz wunderkind rides a ‘sense of urgency’ as he devises marketing and other products

JENNIFER BILL
TORONTO STAR

Good things come in threes, they say, and for young Toronto entrepreneur Jordan Whelan, that means three robust and diverse companies.

Call him a triple threat at 28 years of age, or simply call him fearless, creative and driven. And “restless,” he says.

“If you don’t work incessantly to make your own way, you’ll end up working in a job picking up the leftover scraps of someone else’s dream.”

Whelan’s newest company, Framestr, is poised to shake up the social e-commerce industry, his cardboard marketing firm Our Paper Life will have its products prominently displayed at the 2015 Pan Am/Parapan Am Games, and his

public relations firm Grey Smoke Media has attracted major legal and political clients, including the John Tory for Mayor campaign.

“To me, Jordan represents the millennial entrepreneur, the idea that being good at just one thing doesn’t cut it,” says Britt Aharoni, a radio producer at Newstalk 1010, where Whelan worked as a producer before starting his business career. “It’s about being great at many.”

Framestr acts as a conduit for word-of-mouth product recommendations between friends. Users can share any product on the site via a unique link through social media or email. If friends make a purchase, the original user receives a cash commission from the business, usually between 5 per cent and 15 per

cent of the object’s value.

Since launching in August, Framestr has posted more than 20,000 products from nearly 300 businesses — including camera-maker GoPro — spanning 18 countries. The site has doubled in sign-ups every month.

“The only way a small business can compete with a large corporation and massive ad budgets is the invaluable power of word of mouth,” says the Hamilton-born Whelan, naming Sara Blakeley’s Spanx as one such business that became a billion-dollar household name through the power of talk.

With his sights on business, Whelan broke from the family tradition of working in health care — his father is a urologist, his mother a family doctor, his younger sister studies public health and his older sister is a former nurse now exploring entrepreneurship. He earned a bachelor of commerce degree from McMaster University.

After school he worked for five years in the media — with host Mike Bullard at Newstalk 1010, in digital production at MuchMusic and Virgin Radio, at Sun Media, with a humour column called “Try Guy,” and at the Huffington Post, where he currently blogs.

His first breakthrough company was Our Paper Life (OPL), a marketing design firm that uses 100-per-cent local and recycled materials to create custom-branded cardboard items such as chairs, desks and umbrellas.

For the 2015 Pan Am/Parapan Am Games, OPL has developed products to

be used in the athletes’ village and sporting facilities. Some of the items will be functional, takeaway keepsakes, such as a small recycling bin. OPL will have pop-up displays at various outdoor festivals this summer. A past highlight was OPL’s cardboard “beach” with recliners and umbrellas in David Pecaut Square for June’s Luminato festival.

“Furniture is so ubiquitous,” says Whelan. “We want to offer it as a brandable communication tool for all businesses.”

The young entrepreneur’s third company, Grey Smoke Media, has attracted major legal and political clients, including Tory’s campaign and Diamond and Diamond Personal Injury Lawyers.

Whelan rolls out unique concepts using his “parketing” (PR and marketing) model, collaborating with search-engine-optimization experts. “We’ll get a client a media hit in a major news outlet and then also parlay that into getting them on page one of Google.”

Whelan says he’s content to have his social life on semi-permanent hold and has “stopped counting the days before the weekend.

“There are so many baby steps, coffees, favours and unpaid initiatives I took in order . . . to reach this point. When you have an innovation, it’s very difficult to show your value properly to your customers — it’s challenging to be the first, and definitely no one wants to be the last.

“In business you always have to operate as if someone is breathing down your neck. Always have a sense of urgency.”

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> **LILI-NAZ HAZRATI**

Unlocking the secrets of diseased brains

Neuropathologist has found intriguing links between Alzheimer’s and concussions

JOSEPH HALL
FEATURE WRITER

Dr. Lili-Naz Hazrati is a neuropathologist, a medical specialty that involves examining and diagnosing dead and diseased brain tissue.

And she joined the field mainly for the access it would grant her to this gory stuff.

Because even with recent and prodigious advances in head-scanning technologies, many ailments of this cardinal organ can be diagnosed only after death. And the hundreds of dead brains she’s examined over more than a decade have given Hazrati fresh and promising ideas about some of today’s most pressing neurological ailments.

“Most neurological diseases . . . they give them a diagnosis during life, but the ultimate final diagnosis is really based on the autopsy still,” says Hazrati, an assistant professor in laboratory medicine at the University of Toronto.

“And in order to understand these diseases we don’t understand, we have to classify them properly.”

For example, the proper classification of various forms of dementia — which can be hard to tell apart on the basis of people’s symptoms when they’re alive — can only be based on the hallmark differ-



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ences found in their brains after death.

Hazrati’s work has increasingly focused on dementias caused by Alzheimer’s disease and athletic concussions, two of the most worrisome ailments of our times.

And groups of patients who suffer from these conditions — or their families — have agreed to donate their brains to her medical research.

Dozens of times a year, a pager she faithfully carries will go off, alerting her to the fact one of these patients has died.

And Hazrati, a horror movie aficionado, will either rush off herself or arrange for a colleague to retrieve the brain and send it to her lab.

“The autopsy will then allow me to classify (the diseases) properly,” says Hazrati, who works out of the University Health Network’s Toronto General site.

Dr. Lili-Naz Hazrati is a neurological pathologist studying Alzheimer’s and the effects of concussions, among other brain-related issues.

It was during her classifications of Alzheimer’s victims and concussion-based chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) patients — the latter mostly former athletes — that Hazrati noticed something striking.

While she found that the brains of older CTE patients closely resembled those of Alzheimer’s victims, the brains of younger concussed athletes did not.

What these younger athletes did have was widespread damage and destruction of the brain’s glia cells, which surround and help protect the working neurons that allow for movement, emotion and thought.

As a result, Hazrati theorized that the progression to the advanced forms of both diseases might follow similar routes and — more important — have a common cause in these supporting glia cells.

And, as it turns out, she found that the same glia cell receptors that were activated by injury and inflammation in concussed human brains could be triggered to kick off the degenerative process in mice models of Alzheimer’s disease.

Thus, Hazrati says, the telltale signs of Alzheimer’s disease — the so-called plaques and tangles that stuff the withered neuron cells of its victims — may not be a cause but an end product of changes that originate in surrounding glia cells.

And the triggering receptors within

these supporting cells may prove an exciting target for new drug development and a potential source of biomarkers for early diagnosis and risk-level assessments for both conditions.

A mother of two girls, 11 and 13, Hazrati’s interest in the brain dates back to a summer job she happened upon at Quebec City’s Laval University when she was a teenager.

“I was just starting biology and I heard from somebody else in the cafeteria that there was this job in a lab for the summer,” the Iranian native says.

“I was in this dark room for the whole summer projecting these slides of (the brain structures called) basal ganglia on the wall.

“You become emotionally attached to this work. It became my world, basically.”

Indeed, by the time Hazrati completed her undergrad science degree, she’d already done enough brain research during summer stints at the brain lab to write a quick master’s thesis.

She went on to gain a PhD in neuroscience and did several post-doctoral fellowships before attending medical school at the University of Montreal.

Hazrati hopes that 2015 will allow her to solidify her work on the Alzheimer’s-concussion connection.

“We really need to go forward and to spend a good year of concentrated research comparing all these hypotheses and doing more experiments on this.”