

Potomac ALMANAC

Who's Got the Time?

Growing nationally, personal concierge industry serves Potomac.

By Alex Scofield/The Almanac

Excerpts from article

"One day I was at the Giant. I was tired and had worked all day". "I thought, 'I'm so tired, I would so pay someone to do this.'" "If she would pay somebody to do this, wouldn't somebody else pay her to do it? "People don't want to deal with the minutiae," she said.

AIDA MIDDEL AND Libby Kinkead founded Potomac Concierge last fall. Both Middel and Kinkead figured from their own and their neighbors' experience that the Potomac area had a need for a versatile, problem-solving kind of business.

For starters, Middel and Kinkead knew a high number of dual-income families with demanding careers. "There's a huge need for it, because a lot of people are pretty rushed and stressed out," Kinkead said.

"The super wealthy people have people to do this," she said. "[Typical clients are] two working parents who have just made the decision that they would rather have quality time with each other or their families."

"I'm from the background that you take care of it yourself," Kinkead said. She came to feel differently, however, when she thought about the limited hours some service companies work. Why would an attorney who bills several hundred dollars an hour stay in the house between 8 a.m. and noon to wait for a cable repairman or a plumber?

That's a fairly common request that Middel and Kinkead receive, as are light packing or organization assignments. Other clients' needs are less predictable. Middel has arranged for sick children to be picked up from school while the parents were working. One client needed help with bills and routine home maintenance after the death of a parent. Another needed more than 20 years of photos put into albums. Others are working abroad for several years, and need periodic home maintenance or newspapers removed from the driveway.

It is really pretty fun and different," Middel said. "We're really like problem

solvers. ... We'll basically do anything you need us to."

Mike Benesch, a counselor for the Service Core of Retired Executives who advises Middel and Kinkead, believes there's room for more.

"They are the leading edge," Benesch said. "The personal concierge [industry] is growing ... [and] it's going to grow dramatically." The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects personal and home care aides will be one of the 10 fastest growing industries between 2004 and 2014.

Middel said her company tries to offer versatility, rather than a couple of pigeonholed types of services. She has a background in accounting, while Kinkead's is in professional organization.

KINKEAD SAID customers can quickly grow accustomed to having personal concierge services. "You take care of so many things," she said. "People become very dependent on you."

Goldberg said that is especially true with elderly customers. "You become sort of their conduit to the outside world," Goldberg said.

Because the local concierge companies routinely receive requests to help with bills or enter a client's home, their co-founders described client trust as essential, especially in an industry that isn't as formally regulated as those of accounting or law practice.

HELP FOR ENTREPRENEURS

As a first-time entrepreneur, Aida Middel once thought the concept was too good to be true. When she and fellow Potomac resident Libby Kinkead co-founded Potomac Concierge last fall, they received free counseling and business advice from Michael Benesch of the Service Core of Retired Executives.

"We would have spent thousands of dollars to get this advice," Middel said. SCORE provides help to any aspiring entrepreneur who walks through their door, Benesch said, but the counselors will be forthright if they see a fundamentally flawed business proposal. "In many cases we try to talk people into keeping their day jobs," he said.

Many entrepreneurs aren't aware of the resources available to them, Benesch said. Some try to finance their venture with home equity loans or personal loans, unaware of the more favorable terms a small business loan can provide.

When Benesch meets with prospective clients, he discusses the kind of capital they'll need, the market climate, and work through a detailed agenda for the business. "A lot of people walk away at that point," he said.

Benesch would have told Middel and Kinkead if he didn't think their venture held some promise.

"They want to do this, their hearts are into it, they're excited about it," Benesch said. "If there's ever a place where you can do this, it's Montgomery County."

See www.scoredc.org.