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Surviving Secondhand Entrepreneurship

Meg Hirshberg shares relationship strategies for business owners' spouses

RYE BROOK, N.Y. – Meg Cadoux Hirshberg remembers giving birth covered from head to toe with poison ivy rashes in a rundown farmhouse, but that wasn't the hardest part of being married to an entrepreneur.

The [columnist and author](#) who is married to Gary Hirshberg, founder of yogurt company [Stonyfield Farm](#), which now grosses \$370 million in annual revenues, shared the highs and lows of living with an entrepreneur and tips to overcome challenges at Social Venture Network's (SVN) fall conference Nov. 15.

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Meg and Gary Hirshberg talk openly about the highs and lows of entrepreneurship at SVN's fall conference.

Her insights come from her own personal experience and interviewing hundreds of other spouses for her new book [For Better or for Work: A Survival Guide for Entrepreneurs and their Families](#), which explores the impact of entrepreneurial businesses on families and relationships.

Meg says most entrepreneurs launch their business understanding they are taking a financial risk, but don't acknowledge or vastly underestimate the personal risk.

"It's never a solo venture, it always involves a family, the entrepreneur's spouse, and if you're not supportive of the business, you're not supportive of your mate,"

says Meg, who peppered her presentation with anecdotal stories about sharing her home with Gary's yogurt business, from zero privacy to the pervasive smell of fermenting milk, which led her to venture behind the house nine months pregnant to install a pipe diverting the fumes and leading to poison ivy.

While it's easy to look back now and romanticize the nine difficult years launching Stonyfield as "living the American Dream," Meg says the experience was trying, and as most businesses fail, the lifestyle can push couples to the breaking point.

Then there's the added pressure of running a social business, where the mission to make positive change can drive the entrepreneur to succeed at any cost.

"What if someone's passion is bleeding you dry, causing stress, you have no money, and depriving you of a family life, are you willing to support this vision and dream?" she asks.

"No success in business is worth a personal life in tatters."

Both Meg and Gary say the book is one they wish they had when they were starting out with chapters devoted to some of the most common challenges: from the entrepreneur's guilt of work coming first and the spouse's resentment, to the queasy necessity of borrowing money from family and friends.

Gary, who joined his wife on stage, shared some of the things the two did right from the beginning: things like taking vacations (however small) to going to SVN conferences, where they found support and consolation from a community of peers.

The duo stress the need to over-communicate, but also to know when and what to share. Gary says sometimes he didn't tell Meg how bad it really was.

While Gary chides Meg, whose book career has turned her into an entrepreneur, for demonstrating many of the same flaws, both agree it's been helpful to be in each other's shoes.

Meg adds they've given up trying to create a work-life balance, recommending people instead learn how to be present in whatever they're doing.

SVN's fall conference convened 400 entrepreneurs for four days of learning, networking and celebration, as part of the network's 25th anniversary.

To read more about the conference, check out [SVN's blog](#).

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