

Planning for the future

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Home-based company in Fallbrook provides opportunity for daughter with autism

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Brent and Lenila Batali, like devoted parents everywhere, worry about their children. The spectrum of parental anxiety ranges from the everyday – diet, exercise, health and homework – to the long term. What will they do for a living? Where will they live? Will they turn out to be happy and well-adjusted adults?



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Brent and Lenila Batali of Fallbrook sat with their two daughters, Serena, 9 (left) and Tiana, 12, and their dog, Valentine. The Batalis launched Designs by Lenila, their home-based wedding card and stationery company, one year ago.

But their anxiety goes up several notches in intensity when it comes to their first-born daughter. Tiana, 12, was diagnosed with autism six years ago.

As they work to find what's best for Tiana, from vision therapy to riding lessons, the couple constantly think about what the future holds for her.

"Every parent out there with children with special needs, that's their concern. What are they going to do when they grow up?" Lenila said. "You want them to be productive. You want them to be happy. You want them to be safe. I can't see her going on the bus. She would go home with anyone."

Out of that worry grew a business that would meld the talents of the entire family. A year ago, the couple launched Designs by Lenila, their home-based wedding card and stationery company.

The impetus, Lenila said, was to make sure that Tiana would have something meaningful to do when she became older, as well as to help other children with disabilities.

"I figured if I start my business now, by the time she is 18, it would be big enough that I would just hire her and her friends," Lenila said.

While many families choose to keep their work and family life separate, the Batalis welcome and thrive in the blurring of the lines.

Brent, 39, a produce broker by day, works on marketing the business. The daughters chip in with their designs for Rushless Heart, the company's line of Christmas cards and note paper. While Tiana loves to fold the cards, her younger sister Serena, 9, has become an expert in bubble wrapping.



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Rushless Heart, Designs by Lenila's line of Christmas cards and note paper, includes designs by sisters Tiana and Serena Batali. Tiana was diagnosed with autism six years ago.

In her very first year of operation, Lenila, 41, a watercolor painter, has discovered a niche in creating tropical-themed invitations for destination weddings in locales such as Florida, Hawaii and the Cayman Islands.

The choice of business grew out of her longtime hobby of watercolor painting. Trained as an architect, she designed homes in Orange County before branching out to landscape architecture. All the while she painted, often selling her handmade cards to boutiques.

When a client wanted her to fill an order for 200 invitations in a week, Lenila rose to the challenge. The hobby became a full-time business.

Designs by Lenila began as an Internet-based business and soon found clients throughout the country and from abroad. Lately, Lenila has begun to attend local bridal shows and has expanded her clientele in the San Diego area. She donates a portion of the proceeds to Cure Autism Now, an organization that raises money for autism education and research.

Lenila's affinity for all things tropical grew out of her love of traveling and

her heritage. She was born in the Philippines and moved to the U.S. when she was 5. She met Brent when both were students at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. It was a case of opposites attracting, Brent said.

"She was studying all the time. I had never met anyone who studied so much," said Brent, an avid water skier.

The couple were married in 1990, and Tiana was born three years later.

Tiana's diagnosis of autism came after a roller-coaster journey of not knowing what exactly was wrong or how best to help her.

"With a first born, you don't know what to expect," Lenila said. "Brent's mom is a teacher and a psychologist. She knew something was wrong right away."

As Tiana grew older, it became more and more apparent that she was different.

"When she started talking, she was like a parakeet. There was no reciprocation," Lenila said.

The couple went from doctor to doctor. With each visit, they had a different diagnosis, ranging from Down syndrome to just having a small build.

"We didn't know how to help her," Lenila said. "We didn't know what she needed, what kind of schooling do we give her, how far she would go, we didn't know."

They started their own reading and research and began to piece together the puzzle of Tiana's symptoms. When the autism diagnosis was made, it only confirmed what they had suspected for some time.

While the diagnosis ended the uncertainty of not knowing, it was the beginning of another journey through uncharted territory.

"Autism doesn't let you know anything, either. They are all different," Lenila said.

Studies indicate that 12 in every 10,000 children have autism, a developmental disorder where symptoms can vary from mild to severe difficulties in communication and social interaction.

The quest for what would work best for Tiana brought the Batali family to Fallbrook from San Clemente five years ago. The move was prompted by what they had heard about services available in San Diego County.

Tiana began to attend Maie Ellis Elementary School in Fallbrook, where the family lives in a home on a 3-acre lot with an orchard of 300 trees.

"Because the school is so small, everyone was interested in us," Lenila said. "Tiana really loved it. When we moved here and you would ask her a question, she would just repeat it to us. Now she says, 'What, Mom?' We have conversations."

Later, when Tiana was poised to enter some nonacademic mainstream classes at Live Oak Elementary School, Lenila worked with her teachers to help her and the other students with the transition. She prepared a page full of information about Tiana. She did a skit with the teacher.

"It helped (the students) with the transition of having no special kids to having someone like Tiana," Lenila said. "People need to know how to talk to these kids. You can't hide."

Along with improving her verbal skills, Tiana has learned to swim. She loves to cook and go bowling. Her favorite haunt in the mall is Bath & Body Works.

Younger sister Serena is attuned to Tiana's needs. She often quizzes her sister about colors, shapes and words.

"We have a built-in therapist in her," said Lenila of her younger daughter.

The parents continue to struggle to find what's best for Tiana. It ranges from finding the right diet to helping her stay calm to finding ways to deflect the responses her behavior, such as talking to herself, elicits from strangers.

"There were these two women in the grocery store who said very loudly

how parents give too much sugar to their kids these days," said Lenila, who is torn between walking away and stopping to explain Tiana's condition to strangers.

For Lenila, the business has become a way of connecting with other families dealing with autism. She corresponds regularly with a woman with a 23-year-old autistic daughter.

"We trade advice about autism. I have gotten so many contacts with people with autism and their families," she said.

As she looks into the future, Lenila sees the business expanding to include a line of clothing and gift items to complement the wedding invitations.

"I don't want to stay small because I have big plans for Tiana and her friends," she said.