

Posted on Wed, May. 07, 2008

## Baby business boom

### Charlotte area a growing birthplace for ventures designed to keep newborns to tots happy

LYNN TRENNING

Special to the Observer



YALONDA M. JAMES/Observer staff

Michelle Tunno Buelow watches daughter Ella, 6 months, with a Bella Bib and Binker. Buelow is the owner of Bella Tunno, which has its swank baby gear in Nordstrom and Target.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Plato observed. He could have been writing about the \$8.9 billion U.S. baby products industry.

Research and development departments generate plenty of products. But others are created by parents who identified a need, and grew a business.

Today's well-adorned tots are flush with chic apparel, toys and accessories, a number of which originate in the Charlotte area.

#### **Bella Tunno**

Michelle Tunno Buelow, 32, describes the birth of her company, Bella Tunno, as a case of "fate meets potential meets a good opportunity." After her brother Matt died in 2003, Buelow took a leave of absence from her corporate job in brand marketing.

She had a daughter, Riley Rose, with her husband, Todd, a year later. "I loved being home with her, but needed something that would be for me," Buelow recalls.

Buelow found a creative outlet by making bibs, burp clothes and pacifiers for her daughter. People liked them, so she created three prototypes: a burpee, a binker (pacifier on a strap) and a buttie (colorful changing pads), each in 10 different fabrics.

Since its launch in July 2005, Bella Tunno has been profitable, Buelow says.

It sells three lines at different price points: Tunno Tots is exclusive to Target. Bella Tunno Basics is exclusive to Gap. The Bella Tunno brand is carried by retailers from Nordstrom to Amazon.

Bella Tunno products are made in four factories in North and South Carolina. Factories in South America and China manufacture the Target and Gap lines.

Buelow works out of her south Charlotte home 80 percent of the time.

She laughs when asked how many hours a week she works. "If I logged my hours I'd be sickened. It's similar to asking how much time do you spend with your kids."

---

---