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Having their cupcakes and eating them, too; Startup: Vancouver businesswomen end up with reality-TV show

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Cupcakes, the store, was born in the most unlikely of circumstances. The dynamic duo who own the eponymous, expanding Vancouver business, Heather White and Lori Joyce, were in New York right after 9/11. As sales reps for an odour-control company in Vancouver, their work took them right to Ground Zero.

The pair, friends from their teen years, went to a famous bakery (Magnolia Bakery) for a pick-me-up. They bought four cupcakes, ate some in a cab, and smiles returned to their faces.

"This is what we should do," White decided, upon seeing what cupcakes can do. "Open a cupcake store back in Vancouver." Joyce says White is the creative visionary of the pair, and admits she didn't get it right away.

Now they operate three Cupcakes stores and have three franchised stores in Metro Vancouver. Plans are to take the franchise across Canada.

And last Sunday, a reality-TV series, *The Cupcake Girls*, premiered on W Network. It was to be a show about them expanding their cupcake business. But the producers were in for a nice surprise. Cupcakes turned out to be a business with a colourful cast of characters, issues and relationships.

"We jumped on the growing cupcake trend early last summer when shooting started on this series, and now, as the series is about to hit the air, not only has Heather and Lori's business expanded, but cupcakes are popping up everywhere," says Vibika Bianchi, director of original products at W Network. "As simple and sweet as cupcakes may seem, our audience will be amazed by the behind-the-scenes drama and comedy that goes on in Lori and Heather's cupcake world over the 13 episodes of this series."

White and Joyce are human whirlwinds threatening to break into tornadoes. In the first episode, we meet Joyce rushing for an in-vitro fertilization appointment. At the clinic, she's told there's nothing medically wrong with her and that she has to have less stress in her life. (Ha!)

White, a recovered alcoholic, unhappily drops an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to deliver cupcakes for a boat party that will set sail without dessert if she doesn't do it; her father, the actual delivery guy in a cupcake-pink van, is refusing to fight the snarly traffic to jump into the delivery fray, which includes two wedding cakes, one for a very important client. Dad's stopped for a burger somewhere, while White and Joyce race around. Her mother, who works in the office, is the sapper, defusing emotional landmines.

At one of the Cupcake stores, we meet Cadence, one of the frontline sales team, a transitioning transgender woman with a neon personality. She's saving up money for a sex-change operation.

In an interview, Joyce talked about their naive leap into business. "Neither of us baked. We were



27, we didn't have a business plan, we knew nothing about it and ignored the three rules of business: Don't do it with a best friend. Don't go into it without a business plan. Don't do something you know nothing about."

They opened their first store in 2002, and say they were the first branded cupcake store that just sold cupcakes. Now there are around 100 in North America. "There are tons," Joyce says.

"We've been through times when we've hated each other and it would have been so easy for one of us to walk, but the fact that we didn't, and overcame conflicts, is what made us so much stronger. I'm actually on my second marriage. I married Heather first. It was like a preparation for my next marriage. Even if this ended tomorrow, what I'd take from it is what I've learned about relationships and managing. But it's amazing when you stick through it."

Catching up with the pair as they landed at Pearson International Airport in Toronto last Wednesday, the pair had TV, print and blog interviews ahead of them.