

Best Foot Forward

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By Bethany Bray, Staff Writer

It may be safe to say Richard and Heather Manolian's three children have the happiest, healthiest feet in Boxford.

Heather, Richard and business partner Anthony Howlett have spent four years developing Arch Angels®, a line of children's comfort insoles, and the Manolian children, Ashton, 8, Clayton, 6 and Charlotte, 3, have been testers for the product.

Richard Manolian and Anthony Howlett are podiatrists; they met studying for doctorate degrees at California College of Podiatric Medicine. Now, years later, what started as "a nagging idea" mentioned on a phone call has become a product that hit stores over the winter.



The company, which the Manolians run out of their Boxford home, has sold more than 1,000 pairs of the insoles, which are meant for children ages 3 to 8.

Arch Angels® were launched in February after a long design and revision process, "in between working and diapers," Heather Manolian said. The couple had never run their own business before, and got tips from the small business development center at Salem State College to get started.

One of the product's tests included having Clayton wear the insoles for an all-day trip to the Topsfield Fair. Seeing her middle son with increased energy and no thoughts of sore, tired feet was "an aha! moment," she said. "I knew then that these things really work."

Arch Angels® fill a market niche — supportive insoles for the ever-changing foot of a growing child — that Dr. Howlett and Dr. Manolian say was previously unmet, except for expensive custom-made orthotics. Arch Angels® are the first of their kind: affordable insoles that can be switched from shoe to shoe and purchased based on a child's shoe size, without having to try them on.

"There's nothing like it out there," Heather said.

The bones in a child's foot don't fuse until they are between 13 and 15 years old, Dr. Manolian said. The 26 bones in a child's foot start like a cartilage framework, enlarging and hardening as they grow, he said. Because of this, youngsters are more susceptible to muscle strain and fatigue, which prompts the often-heard cry in the grocery store — "my feet are tired."

Arch Angels® provide comfort and support as a child's arch develops, also offering prevention from pain in the knees, hips, foot arch and back that Dr. Manolian often sees in podiatry patients.

Arch Angels® are sold through the company Web site and in shoe and drug stores up and down the East Coast. Eaton Apothecary in Topsfield has a display of Arch Angels® for sale.

The first time she saw Arch Angels® through the store window in Topsfield was a little bit of a shock, Heather Manolian said.

"I thought, 'Oh my gosh, that's our product!' It's taken so long to get there," she said. "To take that leap has been very exciting ... I've always been a bit of a perfectionist, but I've learned if you don't put yourself out there, you won't get anywhere."

Although the Arch Angels® company is based out of the Manolians' home, every aspect of the manufacturing process, from production to shipping, is outsourced. Arch Angels® are made at a facility in Somerville and shipped to a warehouse in Maine, where they are packaged and shipped to customers.

The Manolians and Dr. Howlett knew from the start that they wanted to keep production for Arch Angels® stateside, even though "everything in the shoe industry is made in China," Heather Manolian said.



Running a Boxford-based business has many advantages, the couple agreed, because you can be 10 minutes away from FedEx, but also able to watch the birds in your backyard as you work. They've used the pool of professionals in the area, from other doctors to a local bank and accountant, to test ideas and get help with starting the business.

"There are so many resources here (in Boxford) you don't even know about," Heather said.

The couple agree they are a good blend — a match of Heather's marketing background and "a mother's expertise" with Richard's more than 20 years of podiatry experience.

Heather Manolian runs the operation side of the business, from sales calls and marketing to designing displays for stores and lining up trade show appearances. Dr. Manolian continues to practice podiatry full-time; he's had an office in Topsfield for one year, is on staff at St. Elizabeth and Beverly hospitals and is looking to reduce the time he spends at his practice in Boston to work more on the company, he said.

Dr. Howlett, who practices and lives in California, is still involved with the business and keeps in touch with the couple through regular conference calls.

After two trade shows, they had almost sold out of their entire first production run of 1,000 pairs of Arch Angels®. They have set a goal of selling between 10,000 and 20,000 units in their first year of business, they said.

Having Arch Angels® sell well so quickly is "finally positive reinforcement," Dr. Manolian said. "For four years we've had nothing but little milestones that we've reached ... the follow-through is exciting, satisfying. I didn't realize that I could put in that much effort. We were ready to quit several times."

The couple, who have lived in Boxford for 11 years, agree that four years of reaching small hurdles — from getting a trademark and transferring the design from paper to a computer program to finding the right materials and manufacturing method and figuring out the rigors of e-commerce — was well worth it.

"I'm happy that the product does what it's meant to do," Heather Manolian said, "and it's good to finally have an answer for other moms (who ask her what to do about their kids' tired feet)."

The process of reaching a goal you've set has been a good experience for their kids too, who have been involved in the process. They have weekly "invention nights" over dinner, where the kids help them brainstorm ideas, they said.

At one point, Heather Manolian had set up a practice display of Arch Angels® in the house, as a prototype before the product hit stores.

"I felt like I was coming home to CVS every night," her husband said with a laugh. "We had to immerse ourselves in it (the product idea) for a while."

Arch Angels® is not the only podiatry product the team has up its sleeves. Now that Arch Angels® are up and running, they're working on ideas for several other products.

"They (Dr. Manolian and Dr. Howlett) have ideas that will knock everyone's socks off," Heather Manolian said.