

# Family Friendly Working by Antonia Chitty

## Granpreneur Profile: Louise of Kids Fly Safe

### About Me and CARES (child aviation restraint)



I am Louise Stoll, Grandmother “of a certain age”. I am American, married, with 5 grown children, and nine beautiful grandchildren 2 – 15 years old.

We live in Burlington, Vermont, in the northeast part of the United States, a small university city in a beautiful wooded and mountainous state. Our home is close to Lake Champlain, and only a few blocks from one of our daughters and three of the grandchildren. My husband is an attorney, now retired from the practice of law, and is the CFO of our company, Kids Fly Safe, LLC. I am the Managing Director of the company and handle business development, public relations, customer service, and creative work for advertising and our website:

[www.kidsflysafe.com](http://www.kidsflysafe.com). Our daughter, Miriam, who inspired the product behind this business, is a school psychologist by day, and at night helps with customer service, Facebook, and Twitter and keeping the website up to date.

### Before the Business

For many years – way back in the 1960s in Berkeley, California – I was a stay at home mom raising my children. I had studied philosophy in college. I became involved in the kids’ education, then ran for, and was elected to the Berkeley School Board, and went back to University myself, to obtain a PhD in public policy and finance. My first “real job” was to handle the public relations and political aspects of a giant sewage project being built in San Francisco, the neighboring Big City. One of the companies involved in that project was a dynamic Construction Management company which wooed and hired me. With my background in public policy and finance I eventually became a senior executive in this company, managing the construction of large public works projects – many of them highways, light rail transit systems, and airports, all over the US. When Bill Clinton became President of the US, I was asked to join the Federal Government in Washington DC and served as Assistant Secretary in the US Department of Transportation for 5 years. We were very involved in those years insuring that all parents used car seats for their children.



One day my daughter, Miriam, flew to visit us in Washington DC with our 2 year old grandson, Jake. She was 7 months pregnant, carrying Jake on one hip, and because she was a safety conscious mom, she was following the American Academy of Pediatric’s orders – and also carrying a 20 lb car seat which she had used on the plane. It was quite a sight– and watching her wobble down the steps I thought “there has to be a better way”.



I doodled some drawings that night, and came up with the idea of a light weight, belt and buckle device that resembled what the flight attendants use in planes. When my husband saw the drawings, he urged me to see a patent attorney. The attorney did some research, and determined that my idea was patentable. I told him to “go for it”.

I began a new, interesting job with a large non-profit organization, and two years later, when that job ended, my patent was “pending” and I decided to explore the commercial prospects of my idea.

There was much to do: understand the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) certification process for child restraints ( which until then only meant car seats); find someone to build a prototype; get the prototype tested to see if it met the FAA standards; deal with all the technical and public requirements of a major Federal government agency; find a manufacturer, and finally, figure out how to get it into the hands of moms, for kids to use. This turned out to be a 4 year long process.

## Finding the Manufacturer – getting it allowed on airplanes



I showed my patent drawings to many companies. All the kid car seat companies liked it but said they didn't know how to get things certified through the FAA – they worked with the Highway department. So I went to companies that manufactured things for the aviation world. On the advice of my patent attorney, I had them sign confidentiality agreements before I would meet with them. AmSafe Aviation, the company that manufactures most of the airplane seat belts and pilot restraints in the world, decided they wanted to partner with me. When my patent was issued I licensed it to them. They built and tested a prototype, simulating turbulence, using instrumented dummies in real airplane seats, and announced that it worked. They took it to the FAA, who of course tested and re-tested it in their own laboratories, and after an arduous 3 ½ year long process, the FAA held a press conference and announced that **CARES** was the first airplane-only child restraint they had ever certified; that it could be used on any seat on the plane, for all phases of flight – taxiing, take off, turbulence, and landing, and that no US airline could keep a parent from using it for their child.

The announcement made headlines all over the country – and even internationally.

### The Launch

All of us thought the airlines would buy CARES and hand it out to passengers with small kids – after all, it weighs only 1 pound, and fits in a 6 inch stuff sack, and they do hand out extender belts to very big people so they can close their seat belts. But the airlines had other ideas – they thought parents ought to bring CARES for their own kids – and they prevailed. So then my manufacturer, AmSafe Aviation said, “Well, we can manufacture it, but we don't know how to sell to parents – we sell exclusively to airlines!”

So I ended up agreeing to figure out how to sell CARES. We had a website built, ([www.kidsfllysafe.com](http://www.kidsfllysafe.com)) hired a PR consultant who got press releases out to a broad array of publications, found a warehouse nearby that could handle shipping, placed a few ads.....and opened for business.

### Funding the Business

We personally took on the costs of obtaining the patent, and finding the manufacturer. When I licensed my patent to AmSafe Aviation, part of the arrangement was that they would build the prototype, do the initial in-house dynamic testing, and then, if it worked as expected, they would cover the expenses of the FAA certification. This licensing agreement was drawn up by our attorney working with theirs. After we launched, with me selling to parents, rather than AmSafe selling to airlines, Amsafe remained a partial financial partner.

### Promotion

Formal promotion is handled by our PR consultant, KidStuffPR, and has been successful in getting many articles about CARES placed in all forms of media. She (Lisa) enters CARES in contests – we have won many of the well known contests for children's products, as well as the Good Housekeeping 2008 Award, and she advises me on new avenues of promotion to consider. The other important promotional effort has been having an informative, easy to use website that is kept up to date. This is essential to our business. The web company we use, Vermont Design Works, also manages a search engine marketing (SEM) program for us, which helps bring traffic to the site. We are indebted to both our PR consultant and our web design firm.

### Mommy blogs

CARES started showing up on mom's, parenting, and travel blogs. Some of it we knew our PR consultant had initiated – but suddenly it had a life of its own. I no longer knew who the bloggers were, but all over the country people began telling each other about CARES, how easy it was to use, and how their kids liked being in it. Sales began to climb, articles began appearing, mostly raving about the product. Safety minded parents were ecstatic at having an FAA approved child restraint for flying rather than a 15-20 lb car seat.

## **Retail Stores**

About 18 months ago, “brick and mortar” independent children’s stores started calling us asking to sell CARES in their stores. They said parents were coming in asking for it, having seen it on various websites, and read about it in magazines. This was another milestone for us...very different from just running a webstore ourselves. We had to learn about bulk shipping, inventory, wholesale pricing so everyone in the chain could be fairly compensated. This pulled my husband further into the business, but he is a good sport. For me it meant – and still means - staying on top of 200 plus clients, ensuring merchandise is timely and that PR information for their customers is professionally done and attractive.

In addition to brick and mortar stores, web stores started selling CARES – basically competing with our own website. An interesting shift has occurred...our website has become much more of a “go to” place for information about safe flying with kids, and much less a “store”. The most visited page on the site – by far – is now the “Where to Buy” page, which lists all the stores that sell CARES. Over 55,000 CARES have been sold so far.

## **Going International**

Canada came calling first – their Transport Canada (federal aviation authority) had been getting inquiries from families about using CARES on Canadian airlines. It took a while – but Canada certified CARES. Then Australia and New Zealand, then the UK, Switzerland, Israel, and Singapore. The EU, with no European Aviation Safety Authority regulations for child safety in place at this time, leaves it up to individual airlines – and most European airlines respect the US and UK certifications, and permit CARES on their planes.

International customers posed a problem – they ordered a CARES from our website and ended up paying more for shipping than for the CARES itself! It didn’t take long before retailers in other countries started contacting us...and now parents can buy CARES in Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia, and New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines.

## **Work and Family**

I do not think I could have developed and run a business like Kids Fly Safe with the demands of a young family without full time household help. Now, with the ability to stay at my computer and phone for hours on end, running this business is entertaining, challenging, and creative. I talk to people all over the country, the continent and the world, juggling time zones, and personal and business commitments. My husband, daughter, and I hold periodic “business meetings” to discuss matters that have come up – usually after a weekend dinner when the kids are watching a movie.

## **Advice?**

If you have an idea that is an original “thing” or “process”, and you believe in it, take the steps you need to protect it – patent, copywrite etc – even if you aren’t ready just then to try to develop it into a business.

No matter how involved you are in the business, always take time to be with family and friends – it is renewing, and you come back to work the better for it.

Learn to do with less sleep!

Expect everything (like closing a deal) to take at least three times longer than you initially thought.