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 Salute to Entrepreneurs 2013

The Big Salad LLC, Grosse Pointe Woods

Winner: Up to \$5 million

By Gary Anglebrandt



John Bornoty and his wife, Beth, opened The Big Salad LLC's first store, in Grosse Pointe Woods, in 2008. Now there are five, all in Southeast Michigan, with two more on the way this year.

What kind of business does a guy who studied marketing and biology and has a background in Web development open?

A salad restaurant, of course.

John Bornoty and his wife, Beth, who is company president and also a high school math teacher, opened **The Big Salad LLC**'s first store, in Grosse Pointe Woods, in 2008. Now there are five, all in Southeast Michigan, with two more on the way this year.

His career path originally was pointed toward industrial health and safety. Bornoty studied science but ran against a hard wall called pre-calculus and switched to marketing and public relations.

Entrepreneurship has always been part of the mix, too. He formed his first business while in high school, doing DJ work for school dances and weddings.

"It was a great way to pick up girls. Everyone likes the DJ, right?" he said.

This business, called **T.N.T. Entertainment** and started out of his parents' basement in Clinton Township, morphed into a concert and band promotion company. One high-profile show at Freedom Hill Amphitheatre in 1990 featured Run-D.M.C., Rob Base and other 1980s hip-hop acts. But it didn't go so well.

"I lost my shirt completely at that event," Bornoty said.

He sold the business and soon got a job with a company looking for someone with a background in promotions and computer technology. He had always been into computers and had a side job in high school repairing Commodore 64s.

The company, **A&M Companies**, did dealership training, media events and media car handling for automotive manufacturers' new car launches. Bornoty became vice president of sales and marketing, helped grow the business and got to drive cars like the new Dodge Viper before everyone else.

In 1995, he left to start a Web marketing business, **Netgroup Inc.**, helping companies develop their first websites and Web strategies. Along the way, he decided to also launch a Web radio broadcasting business called **Interactive Media Broadcasting Co.**

The Web radio business didn't work out, and he closed it in 1999. In 2005, he sold his share of the Web marketing business, took a year off and then started taking courses at **Sacred Heart Major Seminary** in Detroit. One of his life's goals is to become a Catholic deacon, and he continues his studies now.

Bornoty got the idea for Big Salad while on a trip to New York City for a meeting about buying a boutique marketing agency. Instead, after walking across the street to a deli during a break, he came away wanting to start a franchise in Michigan offering similar fare as the deli: high-end salads -- fast food for health-conscious people.

Last year, Big Salad brought in \$1.7 million in revenue, up from just under \$1 million the year before. The company employs 60 people and has added sandwiches to its offerings.

Big Salad plans to open a franchise store in Rochester Hills and a corporate store in the Ann Arbor area this year. Projected revenue for 2013 is \$3.2 million.

After dabbling in so many different fields, Bornoty, at the age of 43, seems to have found one that will hold his attention for good.

"I fell in love with retail. I never would have guessed it," Bornoty said. "I love the employees. I love serving food. It's like one day you wake and realize, maybe I should have been doing this a long time ago. Restaurant retail is what I was meant to do."

