

Creating Options for New Moms

NURSING APPAREL OFFERS COMFORT AND STYLE **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

For years, nursing apparel consisted of a few styles of nursing bras, one or two often messy or stained maternity tunics, or T-shirts.

When breastfeeding, comfort should be paramount to help new moms deal with frequent sleepless nights. But who says you can't have both comfort and style?

Elizabeth Best and her mom, Clareanne Best, invented the Millybutton™ with nursing moms and babies in mind. They are co-owners of the Pittsburgh-area company. The patented breastfeeding apparel accessory helps turn any blouse into a nursing top.

Edith G. Tolchin: Tell us about your background, education and family.

Elizabeth Best: I received my master's degree in architecture from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and worked as an architectural designer in Atlanta until I became a mother in 2008. My daughter, Milly, is now 8 years old. My mother is a retired registered nurse and has been my biggest supporter and partner in crime throughout this process.

EGT: How does the Millybutton work?

EB: The Millybutton makes every shirt a nursing shirt and saves mothers money on breastfeeding attire. It is the extra hand breastfeeding mothers need. It secures her clothing so she can nurse and pump hands free.

The Millybutton can be conveniently worn as a bracelet accessory, and can attach to a mom's diaper bag or even her refrigerator. Because of its magnetic clasp, we often refer to the Millybutton as "a babe magnet."

It is made from BPA-free, medical grade silicone, meaning it can be sterilized, thrown in the dishwasher, cleaned with a baby wipe—you name it! (BPA stands for

bisphenol A, an industrial chemical that has been used to make some resins and plastics since the 1960s.) The silicone band holds a lot of fabric, even a sweater or longer dress, and the encased magnets keep the shirt securely lifted without damaging or crimping the fabric. That way a mom can breastfeed or pump wherever she wants in her own clothes, saving time and money.

EGT: When did you have that first "aha!" moment?

EB: I was a new mom who was having a hard time breastfeeding, which only got worse when I went back to work in a corporate architecture office. I could not afford breastfeeding clothes, and what I did have was not work-appropriate. Pumping at work soon became a stressful and overwhelming experience. One day, my mother and cofounder (a retired nurse) saw me struggling and suggested using a clip. It crimped my top, but in the end, it worked.

EGT: Tell us about your prototyping experience.

EB: We had numerous challenges and created about six different prototypes over a seven-year period. It took us a whopping four years just to secure our U.S. utility patent.

The Millybutton started out as a hard, plastic pendant attached to a chord and was originally worn as a necklace. We switched the design to a bracelet after a mother in a focus group suggested it as a better option. She pointed out to us that it could also serve as a "side reminder," so moms would remember which breast to initiate the next feeding.

We became focused on user-centered design and utilized the standards of the juvenile products manufacturing industry as a guide, with safety a top priority.


Magnets are at the heart of our concept but posed several design challenges. They needed to be encased and strong but not too strong. One of our prototypes erased the hard drive on a mother's laptop!

Also, we discovered that utilizing plastic injection molding was too costly. Our per-piece price was high because we had several pieces, and they required assembly. We almost threw in the towel, but I decided to use my value-engineering skills from architecture



The Millybutton makes every shirt a nursing shirt and saves mothers money on breastfeeding attire.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ELIZABETH BEST



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Elizabeth Best and her mother, Clareanne Best, invented the Millybutton.

and applied them to product design. I realized I needed to make the Millybutton all one piece and have the magnet inserted during the manufacturing process.

After discovering open-cast molding, we cut the per-piece price by more than half—all while manufacturing it locally!

EGT: Where are you manufacturing?

EB: We are proud to be manufacturing the Millybutton at Pittsburgh Plastics Manufacturing in Butler, Pennsylvania, a female-owned-and-operated company.

EGT: Tell us about your CPSIA (Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act) testing protocol. No sharp surfaces? No toxic chemicals or dyes? Any other tests?

EB: Although the Millybutton is not intended to be used by children, safety has always been our primary concern. Our design and material choices are based on requirements set for Children's Products Business Guidance by the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the American Society for Testing Materials.

Our product is made from soft yet sturdy hospital-grade silicone. It is dishwasher safe and BPA-free. The magnets used are fully encased to prevent fracture, rusting and removal. User testing guided our selection of magnets with a safe and effective pull force, prohibitive only for users with pacemakers. Millybutton has no detachable parts as well, and any safety alerts and considerations for users are clearly visible on our packaging.

EGT: Did you use a graphic artist for your logo design and/or packaging?

EB: Our graphic designer is a professor and a first-time breastfeeding supermom who developed the idea while home on maternity leave. She identified with Millybutton and our mission better than anyone else.

The logo embodies everything we stand for: Milly (the infant who inspired me and challenged me), milk, motherhood, and women supporting women. The M is a strong symbol of a proud and empowered breastfeeding mother. We believe all moms are heroes!

EGT: What obstacles, if any, did you encounter in developing this product?

EB: In addition to all we experienced with the prototyping process, as a woman it is difficult to obtain funding. We are currently self-funded and try to do the best with what we have. That means we grow slowly.

I'd say the biggest overall obstacle was just keeping at it. My mother and I have been learning as we go, which has been a wonderful experience but certainly very challenging.

Like all parents, I find it's a struggle to juggle everything that comes my way. I'm always thinking about how I need to make time for my daughter and husband, the true loves of my life. It is very overwhelming and difficult to manage everything, even with the best project management skills and passion.

In the end, it has been both incredibly rewarding and exhausting. And I am so grateful Pittsburgh has an abundance of resources for women entrepreneurs such as us.

EGT: Tell us about your crowdfunding experiences.

EB: The Millybutton is part of the “normalizing breastfeeding movement,” but our images were often considered adult content even if they are for educational purposes.

This was something we had not anticipated. Several of our Facebook ads were taken down for this reason during our campaign, so we were not able to get the visibility we sought. Our images may continue to be an obstacle for us as we move forward with online sales. Crowdfunding turned out to be more about market research and figuring out what our audience responded to. I am glad we did not put a lot of money into the campaign on videos and such. We made enough money to cover our tooling cost, and we are satisfied with that.

EGT: Are you selling only on your website, or to retail as well?

EB: Currently, you can purchase the Millybutton on our website, or at these stores: Brambler Boutique in Pittsburgh; Mommy Gear in Ligonier, Pennsylvania; or the Pure Parenting Shop in Houston. Keep an eye on our website blog or Twitter for more details.

EGT: What advice can you share related to your invention process?

EB: I would tell readers to listen to their gut, be open, but never compromise on their vision. Also, tenacity is key. We have encountered so many obstacles—most of them unpredictable—but through a ton of patience and hard work, we got past them and even surpassed what we thought was possible. ☺

Details: millybutton.com

Edie Tolchin has contributed to *Inventors Digest* since 2000. She is the author of *Secrets of Successful Inventing* and owner of EGT Global Trading, which for more than 25 years has helped inventors with product safety issues, sourcing and China manufacturing. Contact Edie at egt@egtglobaltrading.com.



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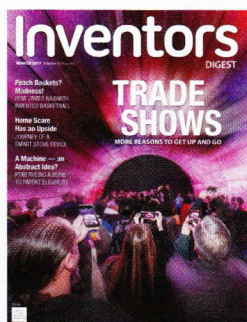
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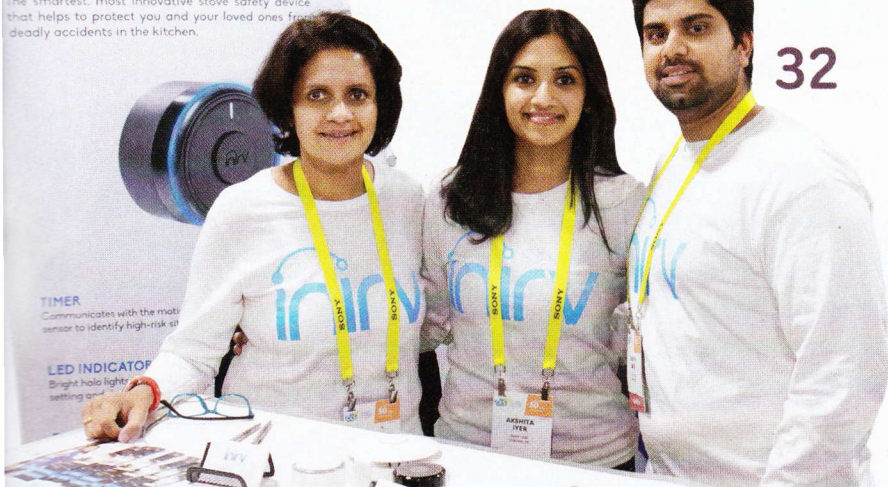


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A scene from a product
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Photo by CES®

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The smartest, most innovative stove safety device
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