



ALISON REDLICH, *Courtesy photo*

Nadja Piatka, founder and president of Nadja Foods, is greeted by the crowd Tuesday at the Key4Women Forum at the Sheraton Burlington Hotel and Conference Center in South Burlington.

## Recipe for success

### Divorced single mom tells women's forum how she built a dream from despair

By **Becky Holt**  
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Nadja Piatka's story reads like a script from "Desperate Housewives."

The healthy food entrepreneur and cookbook author was the guest speaker Tuesday at this year's Key4Women Forum.

After her husband of 20 years left her for an "actress/model," Piatka found herself an unemployed, broke, single mother of two teenagers. After searching for work with out-of-date skills, she realized she was the only person who would give her a job. What she knew how to do well was bake, so she set off to make a low-fat muffin and build a business.

"Impossible dreams can come true," Piatka told the crowd of about 275 gathered at the annual event at the Sheraton Burlington Hotel and Conference Center in South Burlington.

Using her children as a "focus group," Piatka developed recipes she initially baked and sold at local coffee shops. She's now become the "brownie lady," featured on Oprah Winfrey's show and on "The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch," who supplies low-fat baked goods to McDonald's and Subway restaurants in Canada and the United States.

Piatka began her story at its lowest, most humiliating point — hiding with her daughter under a table from a bill collector. After that, on a cardboard insert from a panty hose package, she wrote out the following goals:

- I will own a national company.
- I will have my own newspaper column.
- I will be a best-selling author.
- I will be a public speaker.
- I will have my own TV show.
- I will bring value to people's lives.

She achieved all of them — except one (the TV show) — within the year.

#### Special honors

KeyBank presented its Achieve Award to Heather Paine, owner of Dragonfly Candles and co-owner of Candles & Creations in South Burlington, during Tuesday's event. Paine also was recently named to KeyBank's Key4Women National Advisory Board.

About her goals, she said, the last one is the most important. "I wrote them down at a time I didn't value myself," she said. "I thought if I bring value to people's lives, then I will value myself."

Her optimistic, can-do attitude helped her find success, despite obstacles and adversity — including a battle later with leukemia, she said. She is undeterred by the economic downturn, and she suggests others follow her lead.

"They may not be buying as much milk, but they are still buying." Setting yourself apart with customer service and finding a niche are key to thriving in these turbulent times, she said.

The Canadian businesswoman, who recently became a U.S. citizen, remarked that Burlington was a place she could live. Piatka's core business values fit with Vermont's reputation: giving back through contributions to charity; organic and healthy foods; and eco-friendly and sustainable packaging.

Her latest venture is Nadja Foods ([www.nadjafoods.com](http://www.nadjafoods.com)). With her daughter's assistance, they now offer organic, dairy-free cookies and dairy-free and gluten-free macaroons online.

Proceeds from the Key4Women Forum are donated to the Vermont Women's Fund. This year, KeyBank donated \$7,150 to the organization.

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