

Opposite: The mamaRoo baby rocker, above, is an example of technical creativity not only produced by 4moms, but also nurtured through public, private and philanthropic investment in business incubators in the Pittsburgh region. 4moms' casual yet energetic environment helps to stimulate ideas among staff members such as, below from left, Keith Ruggeri, information technology specialist; Brooke Breon, marketing coordinator; Justine Mayowski, event coordinator; and Kate Sundry-Hong, brand engagement leader.

## IT'S AN OFT-REPEATED STORY THAT STILL HOLDS UP

as an example of first steps in business innovation: One afternoon in 2004, Henry Thorne and Rob Daley met for lunch—a time that for many is a permitted escape from work. But for the two men, escape wasn't the goal. Amid a sea of faces weary from the daily grind, Daley and Thorne excitedly discussed a new idea. They believed that a job shouldn't be a place that people want to flee from, but somewhere they should be excited to return to every day. With Daley's business acumen and Thorne's engineering expertise, the pair reasoned they could create just such an environment. About a year after that six-hour lunch, the tech-savvy baby gear company 4moms was born.

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# AFTER STEEL:

# BUSINESS REBIRTH

PITTSBURGH'S REBOUND FROM THE COLLAPSE OF THE STEEL INDUSTRY IS A TALE OF NEW BEGINNINGS. 4MOMS, WITH ITS ROBOTICS-INFUSED BABY PRODUCTS, IS JUST ONE EXAMPLE OF HOW TIMING, TALENT AND A GOOD IDEA CAN LEAD TO LOCAL STARTUP SUCCESS. BY MICHAEL OLIPHANT



Maintaining 4moms' success requires commitment and enthusiasm among all employees, including, from left, accounting staff members Alyssa Lamberti, Rod Stoll and Lesley-Anne Colosmo.



Since it started almost nine years ago, 4moms has carved out its niche in the baby products industry through the use of advanced robotics. It has grown to 110 employees at its headquarters in Pittsburgh's Strip District and other offices in New York, Chicago, California and Hong Kong, with customers in more than 40 countries. 4moms also has received international acclaim for its work, such as the prestigious German Red Dot Award for "best of the best" product design, which was given to the 4moms Breeze Playard last year. Unlike some play yards that can be complicated to use, the Breeze opens and closes with a single push. Other 4moms items include a self-folding stroller complete with an LCD dashboard and daytime running lights, and an infant tub that keeps baby's bath water clean and at the correct temperature.

Named for its original focus group of Pittsburgh mothers, 4moms' achievements reflect the business ingenuity of its founders—and an evolution in Pittsburgh's economy. The gaping employment hole that was left when steel mills began shutting down across southwestern Pennsylvania has been shrinking over the past 30 years as some businesses expanded while other ventures were created. The names of industrial behemoths such as Gulf and Rockwell that once dotted Pittsburgh's skyline have been replaced by those in finance and medicine like PNC Financial Services and UPMC. At the same time, innovative startups—some founded and staffed by graduates of local universities—are making an impact. While some recent reports suggest even more could be done to stimulate and sustain new business growth in Pittsburgh, entrepreneurs have helped to improve the economic climate.

4moms can be counted in the category of young firms contributing to a more positive business outlook in the region, especially as it hires fresh talent from local colleges. Thorne earned a master's degree in mechanical engineering from Carnegie Mellon University in 1984, worked as a robot expert at General Motors and started his own business making computer controls for robots before he launched 4moms with Daley, who had worked in venture capital. Roughly 75 percent of the company's employees are graduates of colleges in the Pittsburgh region.

Recruitment from local schools is important to 4moms, and university professors who maintained strong relationships with graduates have connected former students to the company. "There is so much local talent here in Pittsburgh," says Daley, 4moms CEO, pointing to Carnegie Mellon graduates as an example. "It's been an incredible asset to us as we've grown."

Cat Tinsley is part of the recruitment team at 4moms and a graduate of Geneva College in Beaver Falls, about 45 minutes north of the city. "We've hired almost 40 new people since I started in January 2013," she says, "Only two were from outside of the Pittsburgh area."

Also reflecting the region's business transformation is 4moms' Pittsburgh headquarters. The offices are housed in the historic Crane Building that was once the home of a national manufacturer of plumbing fixtures. As part of restoration efforts in the 1990s, nonstructural elements in the building were ripped out, creating large open spaces that allow 4moms employees to design their own workspaces. Conference rooms are set off by large glass windows and doors, which prevent



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**Rob Daley**, CEO of 4moms

the boxed-in feeling of workplaces of earlier generations and enable the creative and youthful energy to thrive.

But what companies like 4moms need for initial success are investors. Kate Sundry-Hong, the firm's brand engagement leader, says the focus in Pittsburgh on entrepreneurship and innovation meant resources were available when the company was getting started. "We received investments from Innovation Works very early on that were crucial to our growth."

Innovation Works is a business incubator supported by government, private investors and local foundations, including The Heinz Endowments. Terri Glueck, the organization's director of communications, explains that a determining factor for investment is whether new companies will bring jobs to Pittsburgh. "While they may have operations and markets elsewhere, the bulk of them must be located here," she says. "We're looking for the balance between what's the best technology and what's able to promote job growth."

Glueck adds that "in almost no case is money alone enough to get a company off the ground and sustain itself." That's why Innovation Works supports young firms by connecting entrepreneurs with a network of mentors who have business, market or technological expertise.

Some local philanthropies also are pursuing economic development strategies that include supporting science and technology with commercialization potential. It's an approach that can be traced to revitalization efforts following the disintegration of the steel industry 30 years ago, says Rob Stephany, the Endowments' Community & Economic Development Program director.

"As the steel mills were collapsing and losing market share, our business and foundation leaders decided to take a look at the university sector and figure out how, through technology, innovation and commercialization, we could help reposition this economy," Stephany explains.

"Today, there's a robust ecosystem of venture capitalists, innovators and entrepreneurs so that a young electrical engineering student who has a great idea can get zipped through a university accelerator program and out to one of the nonprofits to access more money and build a prototype. Then the individual can get exposed to other funders."

With that support, companies like 4moms have the freedom to establish their own identities, says Jacki Szymanski, director of human resources. "4moms' culture is unique. We have a great cross-functional group of people here who have unique skill sets and come from many different parts of Pittsburgh and outside of the city."

The team also consists of both new talent and experienced individuals. "The different generations fill in the gaps for each other," Szymanski adds. "At the very beginning, we only looked for very experienced people, but now we're able to pull more from the colleges. And as we grow, we have time to mentor new employees and give them a good experience here."

It's the type of experience Thorne and Daley dreamed of creating during that extended lunch nearly a decade ago. As Daley says of his work and his team, "There's nothing else I'd rather do, and no one else I'd rather do it with." *h*