

Liquid Paper

From little things big things grow

BORN IN 1924, TEXAN BETTE NESMITH GRAHAM WAS A single mother who wanted to be an artist, but in order to support her young son Michael she had to settle for life as a secretary. She began work for the Texas Bank & Trust in 1951 and, despite her poor typing skills, Graham did well, becoming an executive secretary for the chairman of the board. In the 1950s this was about as high as women could expect to climb on the corporate ladder.

Around the same time, the electric typewriter was gradually making its way into American offices. It proved an enormous headache for Graham as the carbon-film ribbons in the machines could be extremely messy. It was impossible to get rid of mistakes (which she made all the time) without leaving blotches of ink behind.

Graham came up with the idea for Liquid Paper when workers were painting the bank windows for the holiday season. When a mistake was made on the window decorations it was simply painted over with white paint. Now, why couldn't Graham do that when she was typing?

She began to use white, water-based tempera paint and a thin paintbrush to cover her typing errors, calling it "Mistake Out." She mixed the Mistake Out in her kitchen, using her artistic skills to blend the paint to match the exact shade of paper. Her boss never noticed the paint on his documents and for five years she kept her product secret. Eventually, though, her colleagues found out about it and wanted Graham to share her secret weapon against typos. She sold the first bottle of Mistake Out in 1956.

The recipe for Mistake Out evolved over time as Graham always wanted to improve the product to be thicker and faster drying. Unable to afford the services of a real chemist, the resourceful Graham recruited an office supplier, a school chemistry teacher, and a friend from a paint company to help her perfect her product. As Mistake Out became increasingly popular, her son and his friends helped fill bottles with the white mixture in Graham's garage.

Graham had a good product, which she renamed Liquid Paper in 1958, but it was certainly no overnight success. She continued to work in the bank, managing her business after hours, making batches in her kitchen and packing and distributing from the garage. By 1957, she was selling around one hundred bottles a month. Good press coverage in an office supply magazine increased turnover fivefold and the business began to show real potential. Graham began researching how to develop her business further and promote her product, and would often cold-call office suppliers.

In 1958, Graham was fired from the bank for using its letterhead on one of her Liquid Paper deals, but by then she could just about afford to devote her time to the Liquid Paper business as orders kept increasing.

She hired part-time help, but it was not until 1961, thirteen years after she first created the correction fluid, that Graham took on her first full-time employee. In 1964, Liquid Paper headquarters moved to a purpose-built shed in her backyard. In 1968, the company was big enough to invest in a factory and a grown-up head office. Annual sales had reached \$1 million. Liquid Paper headquarters was built in Dallas and, under Graham's instructions, included a childcare center and a library. Throughout the sixties, demand for Liquid Paper soared and by 1969, the company was producing one million bottles each year. By 1972, five million bottles were sold annually and sales only continued to increase.

Graham retired from the company in 1975 to concentrate on philanthropy, charitable work for women's welfare, and the arts. She died in 1980, at age fifty-six, just six months after selling her corporation for \$47.5 million to Gillette, leaving a fortune and royalties to her only son (a member of the pop band The Monkees) and to the charities she established. Liquid Paper is now owned by Newell Rubbermaid.

A Christian Scientist, Graham is remembered as a feminist whose invention showed people what women could do in a time when they were not often seen beyond the role of the housewife.

REFERENCES

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Dyson

Suck it and see

JAMES DYSON WOULD HATE THIS, BUT HIS GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT was to turn the vacuum cleaner into a status symbol—a desirable, covetable object that people were prepared to pay top dollar to own. Dyson, an engineer and inventor, would no doubt prefer to think that the public appreciates the technical brilliance behind his invention and believes as obsessively as he does that rival vacuums are so inferior as to be worthless. He is that kind of guy. Either way, his “dual cyclone” became the best-selling upright model in America (in dollar terms), has appeared on *Friends*, and has been handed out in gift bags to presenters at the Oscars.