

St. Anthony: Immigrant entrepreneur creates the PottyPillow

APRIL 17, 2023 — 3:16PM



Neal St. Anthony

@STANTHONYSTRIB

As a young girl in Buchanan, Liberia, Rena Queen Heegaard feared the country's civil war.

When she was 4, troops of warlord Charles Taylor banged on the home of her grandmother.

"They asked what tribe we were and my grandmother said, 'Grebo tribe,'" Heegaard said. "They told her to speak Grebo, and she did. A soldier said, 'These are my people. Go back inside.'"

From 1989 to 2003, more than 250,000 Liberians died in the fighting, and hundreds of thousands became refugees. Heegaard often found comfort hiding in the bathroom of family homes, sitting atop a toilet seat to read or meditate. "To be comfortable, I put a cushion behind my back," she said.

Today, she is turning her childhood habit into a fledgling Minnesota business.

Years since she first sought solace from commotion in a bathroom, Heegaard was encouraged by her husband Eric, a doctor at Hennepin Healthcare, to develop the PottyPillow, an easy-to-clean product used for back support or kneeling to bathe little kids.

Rena Heegaard took WomenVenture classes on entrepreneurship and management. The product drew interest and sales at the 2023 Minneapolis Home & Garden Show.

"My aspiration is to bring comfort to bathrooms," Heegaard said.

When a toilet lid is up, the pillow can be affixed for lumbar support. When the lid is down, it can be used as a seat cushion.

"I want aging loved ones to be comfortable on the toilet, as well as pregnant women, and lumbar support for those who need it, or as a knee pillow when bathing or doing the hair or toenails of a small child," Heegaard said. "It's antimicrobial, water resistant and washable."

She just raised \$10,000 on Kickstarter. That followed an investment of \$150,000 by the Heegaards to cover production and related costs of the first 1,000 units. The PottyPillow [sells online for \\$119 \(https://www.pottypillow.com/\)](https://www.pottypillow.com/).

"Rena is a force," Eric Heegaard said. "Once she sets her mind, she doesn't fail."

Rena Heegaard lived with relatives and friends after her mother immigrated to Minnesota in 1999.

Her entrepreneurial career began when she was a 21-year-old mom and college student in Liberia. She and a former partner started still-in-business City Car Rental in Monrovia, the Liberian capital.

Heegaard knew she would join her mother one day. That finally happened in 2012, when she arrived in the Twin Cities with her sons, now 16 and 13. She had traveled here previously to visit her mother and give birth to her two sons.

Heegaard's mother, Eva Wilson, an accountant in Liberia, worked her way up from nursing assistant to nurse at Abbott Northwestern Hospital. She earned a doctorate of nursing from St. Catherine University.

"Minnesota always felt like home to me," Heegaard said. "My mom was here. My sons were born here. My Minnesota-born baby brother is here."



PROVIDED PHOTO

Rena Heegaard and the "potty pillow"

After rejections for entry-level analyst jobs at Target and United HealthGroup, Heegaard took a job as a Walmart cashier. She enrolled in courses on the Minneapolis campus of St. Mary's University and earned a master's degree. She left Walmart in 2013 for an internship with Comcast.

"Everything picked up from there," she said.

Since 2019, Heegaard has been a contract project manager for 3M, Cargill and Securian Financial. And she kept the idea of the bathroom pillow in the back of her mind.

She frequently shared the idea with Mark Fields, a former Target executive who is a mentor with Score, the network that connects retiree volunteers with entrepreneurs.

"She's intelligent, passionate and resilient," Fields said. "She's faced obstacles and finds a way. She is positive. She understands building a strategy.

"Early on, I was a little skeptical. I told her to do some inexpensive consumer research. She got positive 'proof of concept.' The product is truly unique. I can't predict success. But if her passion and resilience is any indicator, she will be successful."

Rena Heegaard and her mother embody the promise of immigrants whose labor fuels our economy in employee-and-enterprise hungry Minnesota.

Neal St. Anthony has been a Star Tribune business columnist/reporter since 1984.

Neal.St.Anthony@startribune.com 612-673-7144 @StAnthonyStrib

//