



[Back to If you're being bugged, it's Lice Squad to the rescue](#)

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Jerry Langton

When Dawn Mucci attends parties, people invariably ask her what she does for a living.

"I tell them I'm a nitpicker," she said. "They usually think I'm kidding ... or I'm nuts."

But she really is a nitpicker. Not an annoying person who finds fault, but actually a person who makes her living by picking – and having other people – pick nits.

Nits, for those who don't know, are the egg cases of head lice (although in the United Kingdom and some other English-speaking countries, the term also refers to the lice themselves).

Head lice, which infest human hair and feed by sucking blood from the scalp, are a major problem in Canada, especially among children. Besides the discomfort and itching infestation (also called pediculosis), head lice can spread diseases, serving as vectors for typhus and other serious maladies. They do not, as many believe, only infest those with poor hygiene, but can be spread to anyone by contact or by the sharing of items such as hats, coats and towels.

That's where Mucci and her company – Innisfil-based Lice Squad – comes in. She offers a discreet, at-home lice removal service that's painless and uses no harsh chemicals. It's not cheap – about \$45 an hour for her services – but it works.

In fact, it works so well that what had been a small, part-time business run out of Mucci's home is now a going concern with 17 franchises in Ontario and one each in Nova Scotia and British Columbia.

Of course, Mucci did not grow up with dreams of combing through children's hair looking for bugs. A decade ago, she was managing a health and wellness store for a major chain (Herbal Magic) when she left to pursue a career driving big rigs. "It was great, but I couldn't take any long-haul jobs because I had my son at home," she said.

So, she quit to drive a garbage truck in Toronto.

"I was one of five women on the whole team," she recalled. "It was a very physical job and incredibly stinky – I was trained in aromatherapy by that time, so my senses were going wild."

She quit and saw an ad at a job bank for a nitpicker. She knew what it was about.

"I'd been through it as a child and my son had been through it," she said. "I thought it was something I could do but I didn't want to deal with harsh chemicals."

So, after two years of research, she came up with a non-invasive, environmentally friendly method of lice removal and started Lice Squad.

"I started with just my knowledge and my tools and I took the TTC to every job," she said. "I put some small ads in community papers and started a website, but most of my business came from word-of-mouth."

Within a year, she had more business than she could handle.

"I was getting calls from all over Ontario, from other provinces and even from the U.S.; I had to start training contractors in the places with



Dawn Mucci at the Cookstown branch of Lice Squad, her discreet, at-home lice removal service.

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the most calls," she said. "Eventually, those contractors started asking if they could buy into the business – that's when I started franchising."

But word-of-mouth advertising only works if the product or service does. Lice Squad relies on a positive client experience to get more business. Typical of those clients is Denise, who runs an Innisfil dental office and said she "panicked" when she realized her daughter had head lice.

"I freaked out. I was repulsed by them. Although I had been in the medical/dental field for 15 years, I had no idea what to do," she said. "So I grabbed the phone book and the woman showed up in less than two hours."

It wasn't Mucci, but one of her employees.

"The lady who came, Jennifer, was awesome. She calmed us down, showed us what was going on and explained what we had to wash and what we had to throw away," Denise said. "But what really impressed me was the fact that she called me every day for four days to monitor the situation – she didn't have to do that."

Of course, most of Lice Squad's business comes through schools and daycare centres, the places where lice are spread and where scalps are checked.

"We had a family who needed help; we contacted a number of people, but only Lice Squad came through" said Theresa Serracino, pediculosis co-ordinator for the Trillium Lakelands District School Board, which serves Haliburton, Kawartha and Muskoka municipalities. "The family was very grateful for their services."

Such a business is also unlikely to slow down during times of economic turmoil.

"It's kind of an essential service," said Mucci. "In a recession, you might not eat out as often. But if you have bugs crawling around on your head, you don't think twice, you get rid of them."

It also helps that, while Lice Squad isn't the only game in town, it is established at the top of the lice-removal food chain. Even the lice themselves are helping business.

"Studies, particularly in England, have shown lice are growing more and more resistant to the chemicals most people use to kill them," Mucci said.

"We often get calls after people have used commercially available treatments and we still see crawlers."

Mucci may not have the most glamorous job around but she maintains there are rewards beyond the financial ones.

"It's an incredible feeling to be able to help someone get through something so stressful."