



Saturday evening, November 8, saw [The Baking Bandits](#) win [REV Birmingham's "The Big Pitch"](#) — a first-time business plan competition sponsored by PNC Bank. Ten businesses vied for a \$10,000 prize (with an additional \$5,000 audience choice award presented by [AL.com](#) and given to [The Magic City Spool Bus](#), a mobile sewing studio concept) and received business coaching and mentoring throughout the process.

[Kristen Farmer Hall and her fellow bandits, daughters Emma and Eleanor](#), sat down to discuss everything that'd happened in the past year on October 30 in their new event space, [The Nest](#), in Birmingham's Avondale commercial district. This interview took place one day after the initial mentor pairing for The Big Pitch, a week before their first public appearance for the competition and as the Bandits were celebrating a year of baking. Emma watched videos on a smart phone while Eleanor read from a book while Kristen talked about the whirlwind that's been the last twelve months.

"I'm thrilled with the way it's been received. What started out as baking lessons turned into a one-week pop-up shop, which turned into a spring, summer and fall of sell-out farmers markets," said Hall. "This week we celebrated our one-year anniversary and we're thinking about opening a brick-and-mortar, so it's been an unexpected journey."

It's a journey that started as a labor of love. "I started baking with [my daughters] on Sundays. For me, baking has always been about sharing. Baking and sharing and being comfortable in the kitchen has always been therapeutic for me. I recognized that for most people the kitchen is not therapeutic and it's a stressful place. I wanted to start the girls young, and in the kitchen, and cracking eggs, and making a mess."

The fruits of their labor led to another dilemma with a simple solution. "When you make cookies, you have cookies all over your house. So we started packaging them up and delivering them to friends and neighbors and became known as the Baking Bandits." It's also led to cookies and other baked goods (including galettes and scones) being available at [Lucy's Coffee and Tea](#) as well as two of the city's newest eateries — [Bottle & Bone](#) and [Revelator Coffee](#).

The adventure has now brought them to a space in the [Avondale Bricks](#) that's already received rave reviews as it's hosted everything from [an event during the city's second annual Design Week](#) to wedding receptions. The space, selected after a sixteen-month process, is one that allows for Hall to think about the possibilities and opportunities. "Interestingly enough, I chose this space in Avondale for the Nest, but it happens to be a brilliant location for a bakery," she said. "In the last few months, there's been such a food renaissance here in Avondale, it really is a perfect addition to the neighborhood. We had nightlife, entertainment, and bars, and we've now grown a lunch into dinner crowd, but we still don't have breakfast and before lunch," she continued. It's part of a renaissance taking place throughout the city, and one that Hall credits in part to "the entrepreneurial spirit of Birmingham coming back" and to "a lot of us who have dreams and skills and desires" being given the opportunity to pursue them.

"It still requires hard work... a great business idea, and it requires you solving the problem, but it can be done, and it's exciting too that Birmingham is really supporting and excited and taken to the renaissance."

Hall has pursued other artistic endeavors, including (and most notably) Spark Design Studio, a project featuring handmade glass jewelry and housewares that led to [an appearance on HGTV back in 2009](#). She points out that those efforts — and her previous career in fundraising — have prepared her for this latest chapter. "I feel like I've really found my niche," Hall says. "It's a combination of chemistry, creativity, marketing and so many other things that I love."

The culinary creative is also participating in the first class of [Co.Starters](#), a new nine-week offering from [Create Birmingham](#) (formerly the Cultural Alliance of Greater Birmingham) in partnership with REV Birmingham and [MAKEbhm](#). "[The program] has been incredible because basically it takes you through that business from an idea to reality and you have to face hard truth and the hard numbers," said Hall. "It's also not your traditional business plan experience either. It's taking you through a lot of the emotional side of things, and that's helpful." she continued.

During the conversation, Hall spoke of the hope she had for the space if The Bandits were awarded the prize money.

"I definitely love the idea of being a community spot, for people to come and enjoy life, work, and other things." She continued, "I've talked to freelancers and other creatives... stay-at home moms, working moms — it's a really broad group of people who live in Crestwood, Avondale, Forest Park, Woodlawn — to just kind of become a nest. As I envisioned The Nest, the bakery was never part of the original vision, but it all kind of works together." It also brings with it a whole new set of questions. "The idea of opening a brick and mortar bakery is an interesting one in terms of 'Do I want to have a single location that people come and get Baking Bandits?' or 'Do I have want to have the full experience here at the Nest and then you're able to get it elsewhere?'," said Hall.



All of the recent opportunities have led Hall to take a day by day approach to the future, though [it definitely received a boost last night as a result of the win](#). When asked about how plans for the bakery would proceed if she won, Hall said, "...depending on what happens [with the Big Pitch], I would say 3 to 4 months — probably a shortened timeline just because we've already located a space; we already have a space; the space is actually already built out completely for a cafe except for our kitchen in the back. We've have elements for it, but we've got some work to do back there. We're sort of poised for a relatively quick turnaround." After all, they've been able to test the market for a year now. It also means she's been able to realize something few get an opportunity to enjoy: "It's interesting, the two things that I love, baking and events, can all be in one space."