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Feature by Brandon Copple

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**Genevieve Thiers, 29**  
**Founder of SitterCity, Inc.**

It's quarter to five and, for a moment, Genevieve Thiers is still, locked in on an end-of-the-day e-mail. She sends it and returns to her usual state of hyperactivity. For the next 10 minutes she twists and scoots in her chair as her hands and eyes fly around her desk, from keyboard to mouse to phone to file drawer. Then, abruptly, Ms. Thiers is finished, as is another day at her company, SitterCity Inc. She bolts from her chair, scoops up a stack of music books and heads for the elevator.

A minute later she's hailing a cab at Division and Wells streets. Five minutes after that she's hustling through the halls of the Lyric Opera building with her voice coach, Celeste Rue. They reach the rehearsal room, where Ms. Rue goes straight to the piano and launches into Handel's "Bel piacere." Finally, Ms. Thiers sings, and her soprano fills the room, displacing the traffic noise from the Washington Street Bridge six stories below.

But a few bars in, Ms. Rue cuts her off, raising her hands from the keys. "Stop," she implores. "Take a breath."

For Ms. Thiers, taking a breath doesn't come easy. Only here, in her regular singing sessions with Ms. Rue, does she find respite from the self-imposed chaos of her life.

In addition to her job as CEO of SitterCity, the online baby-sitting service she owns and that she expects to grow 400% this year to \$3 million in sales, Ms. Thiers runs a professional opera company. This year, she also planned her wedding and wrote a book about baby-sitting.

And she doesn't drink coffee.

"It's insane," she admits. "It's just the way I live."

Ms. Thiers was even born in a hurry, coming into the world in the back of an ambulance racing to the hospital in a Philadelphia blizzard. Growing up, she ran a serious baby-sitting operation with her twin sister, Katherine. They divided the market in their housing development and worked as many as 10 jobs a week.

After graduating from Boston College in 2000 with a music degree, Ms. Thiers cooked up the idea for SitterCity: Help parents find qualified baby sitters through a trustworthy database and a simple Web interface.

She wrote the business plan while working full time at IBM Corp. and launched the company in 2001. A year later, she moved the business to Chicago so she could enter Northwestern University's graduate program in voice. For two years, Ms. Thiers worked full time toward her master's and ran the booming SitterCity — a juggling act that once had her dash from a board meeting to take the stage in the second act of "Dialogues of the Carmelites."

This year, SitterCity added pet- and house-sitting and a few other services for its thousands of members, mostly parents who pay \$8 a month for access to full profiles of sitters in their area, including reviews and ratings from other parents and criminal background checks. Ms. Thiers has also been signing corporate deals to provide SitterCity services to employees of companies like MasterCard Inc. and Accenture Ltd.

Ms. Thiers' relentless energy is critical to the success, and survival, of SitterCity, a smart business but one that's easily and cheaply copied.

"Companies like SitterCity are literally willed into existence by force of personality," says Chicago venture capitalist Matt McCall, a principal at Northfield-based Portage Venture Partners, which is not an investor in SitterCity. "Genevieve has that evangelical quality."

And evangelize she does, adding a steady stream of national television appearances — she's done the "Today" show three times — to a schedule that doesn't stop. Except when she sings.

The moment Ms. Thiers walks into her weekly hour-long coaching session with Ms. Rue, she goes from CEO to pupil, forgets the pressures and headaches and gives herself over to the music. "It's very cleansing," she says.

After the lesson, Ms. Thiers wants to talk about her teacher. "Most people in opera don't understand why I'm in business, and a lot of people in business don't get opera," she says. "Celeste understands I want to do both. Singing with her is like going to the spa."

Then she turns to hail a cab. The music's over, and Ms. Thiers is going back to work.