

Moving on Via dance

Friday, April 15, 2005 | By Nicole C. Wong

Isa "GlitterGirl" Isaacs was playing with fire when she ignored her boss' request that she stop wearing glitter as eye shadow. The Mountain View technology company canned her.

Now Isaacs literally plays with fire for a living -- while still wearing that sparkly stuff on her eyelids.

In 2002, Isaacs founded the Temple of Poi, a school in San Francisco offering body movement classes that meld mind, body and spirit through dance and meditation. Students learning the art form -- known as "poi" -- can start spinning flaming sticks around their bodies after 10 weeks of instruction.

Isaacs began practicing poi in 2000 as an hourly exercise to help her cope with a repetitive stress injury.

"I wanted to have a job where I could be creative and fun," said the 36-year-old.

But the new career was also driven by a stalled job search and a mountain of debt.

Isaacs, who had been earning \$165,000 a year, was almost minted a millionaire on paper before she was fired in 2001. Despite more than 11 years of experience ranging from systems engineering to marketing, she couldn't secure another job in the tech sector. Her former employer had instituted a job reference policy of confirming employment without commenting on performance.

"When I lost my job, I lost all my references from the tech industry," she said.

The \$10,000 a year she was pulling in from poi classes and other work wasn't cutting it. She calculated it would take 217 years to pay off her \$42,000 of credit card debt if she could even scrape up the minimum \$200 monthly payments.

So in 2003, she filed for personal bankruptcy. She spent the next year couch-surfing at friends' pads so the money she saved on rent could keep her poi studio open.

Now, with the bankruptcy case closed and the poi business booming, Isaacs has new money concerns: How can she keep growing revenue without opening multiple locations and adding staff or trying to be everywhere at once?

She contracted with four instructors to help her offer more than 14 classes a week. In a little less than three years, about 635 students have enrolled in the Temple of Poi.

In September, Isaacs launched online classes, which have attracted more than 15 additional students from Fremont to Australia.

It's a "way to take my business to the international market," she said. "I wanted to have a

way to open up a store
around the world without
necessarily having a
location everywhere."

Contact Nicole C. Wong at
nwong@mercurynews.com or
(408) 920-5730.