

And the winner is ... her again

CONTEST QUEEN | When the 2001 dot.com crash left marketer Carolyn Wilman without a job, she decided to 'just win everything I need.' Now she makes a career out of contests. *By Paul-Mark Rendon*

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR, OTTAWA

Contrary to most people, Carolyn Wilman likes Mondays. Quite a bit, actually.

For her the day starts off just like any other weekday, with the stay-at-home Oshawa mom tending to her 3-year-old before driving her to pre-school in the family SUV. The rest of the day is pretty routine, too, with Wilman picking up Nicole at lunchtime and finding ways to keep her occupied for the rest of the afternoon.

But Monday has a special place in Wilman's heart — it's when mail delivery resumes after the weekend break. And Wilman tends to get a lot of good news in the mail.

"They were playing post office at Nicole's nursery school," says the 39-year-old Toronto native. "I was there and I said, 'Nicole, you tell your teacher why we like our mail lady so much.' And she said, 'Cause we always win stuff in the mail!'"

"Always" may be somewhat of a stretch. But how many people win at least a couple of prizes a week? Over the past four years, Wilman has taken what started as a once-in-a-while hobby of entering promotional contests and parlayed it into a jaw-dropping success story. Last year, she won more than 150 contests, worth a total of about \$34,000 in cash and prizes. In 2004, she won 125 of them worth much the same.

Wilman has scored everything from 99-cent music downloads to a \$10,000 Greek Island getaway. She once met Sting through a contest. And she started dating her husband, Craig Borysowich, when she won tickets to an Ice Capades show in 1991 and invited him along. Last August, Wilman won a whopping 33 contests. Most other months, she nets between 10 and 15 victories.

She hauls in so much stuff that she gives some away to family and friends, if she hasn't already put their names on winning entry forms. Husband Craig, a project manager for an IT company, says he's used to picking up the phone and discovering he's a lucky winner. He won a radio contest to become a judge at a Hawaiian Tropic bikini contest in Florida. In 2003, he got to do a lap in a pace car at the Molson Indy. And he gets to share a lot of his wife's winnings. "We've been able to do a lot of ... cool things that people just normally wouldn't get access to."

It's enough to make you think that Wilman's the luckiest woman in the country. But there's a connection between her success rate and the work she puts into what has essentially become a full-time passion. With the aid of special computer programs such as RoboForm and Turbo Sweeps, which allow her to auto-fill online entry forms, Wilman sends out as many as 7,000 ballots every month.

"People say, where do you get the time?" she notes, brushing back her shoulder-length hair. "I'm like, 'Well, how many shows do you watch in the evening? Take two of those shows and sit in front of your computer and enter contests instead. That's where I get the time.'"



SALVATORE SACCO FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Carolyn Wilman, at home in Oshawa, won 150 contests last year, worth about \$34,000 in cash and prizes. She sends out thousands of entries every month.

It all started in 2001 when the dot-com crash left Wilman, an Internet marketer, jobless, and the imminent birth of her daughter meant spending more time at home. After a few weeks of unemployment, she stumbled onto a *Reader's Digest* article about one woman's contest addiction.

It was proof that the best things in life can indeed be free.

"I thought, well, that's a good idea. I can't find work right now. I'll just win everything I need," she says, laughing. "You know those crazy ideas you get in life lying in bed reading at night? I thought, why not?"

Wilman began scouring the Net. She discovered an abundance of information in the form of newsletters and online chat groups that shared the whereabouts of thousands of contests and details on how to get in the game. Cars, trips, cash, you name it — it was all up for grabs, and websites like *canada.contest.com* and *winacontest.com*, with their accompanying newsletters, are goldmines of information. Over time, she developed a system, one she'll share this month in her self-published first book, *You Can't Win If You Don't Enter*.

In June, Wilman will travel to the U.S., where contest "sweeping" has a huge following, to speak at an annual conference of like-minded hobbyists. She even has her own website, *contestqueen.com*, where she offers advice and links to contest resources, as well as consulting services for companies looking for third-party evaluation of their contests. In some corporate circles, she's become well known for pointing out contest flaws. "If you're a bank and you worry about whether your safe can be broken, you hire a safe cracker," says Brenda Pritchard, the partner at Toronto's Growling Ladler Henderson LLP who heads the firm's national advertising law practice. "That's basically what Carolyn does."

Wilman's site gets an average of 3,000 hits a day, proof that the contest community is alive and well in Canada. "I always suggest joining either a newsletter or a group, because the other great part of the hobby is the people," she says. Last month, Wilman won a \$4,000 trip to Whistler, B.C., as part of a Bell Canada promotion tied to the Winter Olympics. Joining her on the trip this month is Woodbridge resident Angie Valenzano, who won the same contest. They've already made plans to meet. Wilman has also befriended a Vancouver woman who's amassed more than \$1 million in cash and prizes over 25 years of "contesting."

Wilman cautions that winning big requires more than just a system. It also means weathering criticism about what she does — including allegations that she cheats because she enters so many ballots. This contest ace, who also finds time for gardening, baking and reading (she's a Sue Grafton addict), is mostly unfazed by it, however.

"I actually think I'm on the cusp of where I want to be," Wilman says. "I'm with my family a lot. I've parlayed a passion into a career. For me this hobby is more than a hobby — it's now my life."

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