

NEW Pioneers

STORIES OF 100 BC WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS



Foreword by Premier Gordon Campbell

NEW Pioneers

SELECTED STORIES OF 9 ABORIGINAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

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Preface

This book, *New Pioneers: Stories of 100 BC Women Entrepreneurs* is a celebration of the pioneering spirit of 100 contemporary women entrepreneurs from around the province. At Women's Enterprise Centre, we feel it is not only important to recognize and celebrate our entrepreneurial roots, but also essential to record those accomplishments for the generations to come.

No longer limited by traditional societal views of what constitutes 'women's work', today's female entrepreneurs are boundless in their dreams and the type of businesses they own. These days, it is no more surprising to see a woman who owns a software company or an adventure travel company than it is to see a woman-owned clothing store or beauty salon.

It is our belief that society must encourage women of all ages, ethnicities and life stages to view business ownership as a valuable career option. And, it would appear that the citizens of BC agree. In a recent survey, 94 per cent of the respondents said entrepreneurship is a valuable option for women and 98 per cent agreed that women entrepreneurs are important role models for girls and women.

Unfortunately, in that same survey, only 40 per cent of the respondents could identify a woman entrepreneur.

It is our hope that this book will build that awareness and encourage, influence, inspire, provide role models and motivate women and girls to consider entrepreneurship. The stories in this book showcase the successes and challenges which BC women entrepreneurs have faced. The book also highlights the support these women have received from friends, family members, women's business networks and business service providers such as ourselves.

We first got to know many of these women when we asked local business service providers to tell us about entrepreneurs who were employing the techniques we teach in our workshops. Many of the New Pioneers profiled were gracious enough to share their time and experiences as storytellers for workshops and training events offered by Women's Enterprise Centre in their home communities. Many came to us for support, because the traditional lenders were unable to finance their business ideas.

We had some tough choices to make in selecting the final stories that appear in the book and we couldn't feature all the women we interviewed. The following criteria were used to help us identify the New Pioneers. The women chosen have 51 per cent or more ownership of their business. They must also be a 'pioneer' in some sense: perhaps they were the first in their community or region with their product or service; or maybe they're an innovator in a delivery model, product or idea; they may be working to keep their traditions alive or promote their culture; they may have encountered unique life circumstances which require a courageous pioneering spirit to overcome; or perhaps they own a business in a non-traditional industry.

We looked for representation from each region of the province, Northern BC, Kootenay Rockies, Thompson Okanagan, Lower Mainland & South Coast, Vancouver, and Victoria & the Islands. We also sought stories that represented the various cultures and ethnic groups living in BC as well as a cross-section of age ranging from under 35 to over 55 years.

No matter what the industry, age, cultural background, or region in which they live, these women are deserving of the title and recognition as New Pioneers in BC business. We know there are many, many more women whose stories we'd love to tell. Perhaps there will be a Volume 2!

Acknowledgements

On behalf of Women's Enterprise Centre, I would like to acknowledge the many people and organizations involved in this project.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of: Western Economic Diversification Canada, BC Ministry of Small Business and Revenue, BDC, Black Press, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, and the assistance of the British Columbia Museums Association.

I would like to thank the Women's Business Networks throughout the province, many of which are featured in this book, for their support and mentoring of women entrepreneurs in their communities.

Thank you also to the writers and editors: Sara Couper, Billie Dobbs, Jane Eamon, Kathy Fahey, Tracey Frederickson, Darcy Nybo, Dawn Renaud, and Marilyn Strong. Thank you to Andrea Lindal who produced the book, with design assistance from Madhouse Creative

Inc. We owe a big debt of gratitude to Marilyn Strong, a pioneer in her own right. She was the project manager on this ambitious initiative, who outdid herself this time!

I would also like to acknowledge two tireless champions of small business in BC: the former Minister of Small Business and Revenue, Rick Thorpe, and the former Minister of Community Services, Ida Chong. Your vision and efforts have made the province stronger and more vibrant economically. Your active support of Women's Enterprise Centre initiatives to assist women business owners in BC over the last several years has helped to change people's lives for the better, as evidenced in many of the stories featured in this book.

The final acknowledgement must go to the New Pioneers themselves, whose tenacity, courage and fortitude motivated us to create this compendium of women entrepreneurs. I hope it inspires you as much as creating this book has inspired us!



Laurel Douglas, CEO
Women's Enterprise Centre
September 1, 2008

Foreword

As British Columbia celebrates its 150th anniversary, there is no better time to recognize the critical role women entrepreneurs have played in building the province we live in today.

Since 1995, Women's Enterprise Centre has been helping women start, grow and succeed in business by providing advice and loans, training and mentors. Small businesses are the most important component of BC's economy, with companies with fewer than 50 employees representing 98 per cent of all businesses in British Columbia and creating over one million jobs. Moreover, almost 36 per cent of BC's small business owners are women.

The face of BC business is as diverse as its geography. No two stories are alike. These women range in age from under 25 to over 75, and come from all regions of the province and from a huge range of cultural and economic backgrounds including First Nations.

Whatever their background, they are all New Pioneers of BC business. They have demonstrated the passion and commitment needed to give effect to ideas, and turn those ideas into viable businesses. From birch bark biting to broadcasting, from seafood marketing to encryption software, these women have proven themselves as visionaries

and critical thinkers, risk-takers and organizers.

The women featured in this book have risen to the challenges of entrepreneurship and business management. Each one is an inspiration, whose individual story has made an important contribution to the ongoing story of British Columbia.

“The women featured in this book
have risen to the challenges of
entrepreneurship...”



Gordon Campbell, Premier
Province of British Columbia
September 1, 2008

Introduction

Women Entrepreneurs are Here to Stay

Women-owned businesses have been increasing in numbers all over the country. By the end of the 1970's, over 200,000 women were running their own business in Canada. By 1990, that number had jumped to half a million. Today, over 800,000 women in Canada own a business, and that's expected to reach 1 million by 2010.

In 1995, there were about 98,000 women-owned businesses in BC. By 2004, BC Stats reported that 137,000 women owned a business; a 41 per cent increase in ten years. We expect women will continue to own at least 35 per cent of all small businesses in BC in the future.

Who is the typical BC woman entrepreneur today? Her average age is 43 years old. In fact, almost half the women business owners right now are under the age of 45. The typical woman-owned business might have 2 – 4 employees, including herself. She has likely financed her business on her own or through friends and family as she is probably very nervous about taking on debt. She is most likely married, and has a one-in-three chance of having kids under the age of 12. She probably has no prior management training. Her business is perhaps in the service sector, maybe a spa or a salon, possibly food service or retail. In fact, 70 per cent of women-owned businesses today are in the service sector.

While this may be a good description of the typical BC woman entrepreneur, there's more. Immigrant and aboriginal women represent a growing share of these numbers. One in five self-employed BC women were not born in Canada, and immigrant women are starting businesses 30 per cent faster than immigrant men. Aboriginal women own almost half of the aboriginal businesses in BC, much higher than the provincial average of 35 per cent.

In the next 10 years, more women over 55 will make the transition to running

their own business. That is the fastest growing group of women business owners in BC and they are starting businesses at twice the rate of men their age. This 'transitioner' group (or seniorpreneurs) is going to represent one third of all women business owners in BC by 2015.

That's the face of women entrepreneurs today, however it's changing. In the past decade, the number of women entrepreneurs with business degrees has gone up by more than 10 per cent a year. That's twice the pace of men. They're also going into higher-skilled occupations, which is raising their average income.

Women have a very holistic set of motivations for getting into business for themselves. The simple indicators of success from the past: sales, profit and number of employees, just don't tell the whole story anymore. Based on a 2006 study done by Women's Enterprise Centre, women consider business performance to be very important, but they also rate very highly their own personal satisfaction, and work-life balance. These New Pioneers are no different. And this holistic approach is now becoming more accepted in all circles as the true measure of success for all entrepreneurs.

About the New Pioneers

Because each woman is unique, you won't find any one person who exactly fits the above description in this book. What you will find are everyday women who have done something extraordinary: they started and succeeded in their own business. In spite of the odds, in spite of the personal, family, community and geographic challenges they believed in themselves and their passion. They made it happen.

Some started their business on a shoestring; some with personal or family loans; and some with help from lenders like Women's Enterprise Centre.

Introduction cont'd...

In fact, thirty-six of the women profiled in this book are our loan clients. Fifty-seven of the women featured were volunteer storytellers at a Women's Enterprise Centre workshop or have been featured in one of our Resource Guides. Eight women are volunteer mentors with our mentoring program, fifteen have taken one or more of our workshops and forty-two received our business advisory services.

Many of the women featured in this book belong to local women's business networks. These organizations support and mentor women entrepreneurs and provide opportunities for women to take on different types of leadership roles.

From Queen Charlotte City to Sparwood and Fort St. John to White Rock, BC women entrepreneurs are also influencing leadership styles in business. The 'command and control' style of business leadership that existed in the business world 25 years ago is now passé. It's been replaced with a more collaborative approach, which treats employees as equals and values the sharing of power and information. This approach to leadership is the style which women naturally use. The business world is adopting our way of leading, and it will make women leaders more and more in demand in future!

It is our hope that the profiles in this book will build awareness of women entrepreneurs, their challenges and successes, and provide inspiration and role models for women and girls.

How did we do?

To help gauge the success of this book we need your help. To entice you to answer eight short questions about the book, we are offering a \$300 spa package to a spa of your choice anywhere in BC.

The questionnaire will be available on the Women's Enterprise Centre website, womensenterprise.ca until June 30, 2009 and we encourage you to visit our website to give us your feedback.

What can you do?

If you live in or are visiting one of the New Pioneers' communities, please take a few minutes to acknowledge her.

One last suggestion: if somewhere in your life, there is a young girl or a woman who expresses an interest in owning her own business we hope you'll gift her with this book, or encourage her in some other way. As baby boomers retire and exit their businesses, it is our obligation to encourage the younger generations to step up to the plate and take over so we can continue to enjoy the wonderful standard of living we have here in beautiful BC, "*the best place on earth*"!



“Operating the business as a family means we treat each and every employee as if they were my brother or sister and without reliable, honest and dependable staff, I could not be succeeding”

Ramona Davidson

COFFEE TALK EXPRESS/THE PENCIL BOX/RAMONA'S PROMOTIONS
BOX 51, CHETWYND, BC
250.788.3422 | www.coffeetalkexpress.com

Ramona Davidson's business is all about building on what's positive in her community. She has applied the same principles to her own life. When she was unemployed in the late 1990's she decided to use her accounting background in a totally unrelated business. Her business acquaintances were encouraging her to start up a newspaper. There was already another local paper, but she was convinced she could do better and went into business anyway.

Within a couple of months from the initial concept, the first issue of Coffee Talk Express was printed. "We have taken the newspaper concept and put a community focus on it," says Ramona, "with the emphasis on what is good in the community. We keep the community informed but we don't search out bad or negative news."

Ramona says she was "attracted to the business, liked computer work, and just did it." Her accounting background has helped her to keep her company profitable. "From day one, we've always been in the black. If we can't do it without going into debt, we don't do it: we save until we can afford it." She started without a nest egg, but her initial costs were minimal, as she had

the use of a photocopier and other equipment.

Today, her business has grown to include a stationery store, The Pencil Box, as well as a marketing and promotions company, Ramona's Promotions.

Ramona believes an entrepreneur is someone who wants to follow their dream and doesn't let anyone stop them. She has successfully met the challenges of staying alive in business and of finding and keeping great staff. "Operating the business as a family means we treat each and every employee as if they were my brother or sister and without reliable, honest and dependable staff, I could not be succeeding."

Financially, the business has also been a success and Ramona is busier than she has ever been. She feels fortunate to have the full support of her husband.

"He's my hidden backbone," she says, and she credits the rest of her family too. "My whole family supports what I do. Without that support I don't think I could do what I have done."

*"When you are in business, be honest.
Be honest to yourself and your customers."*

Tryna Gower

TRYNA GOWER PHOTOGRAPHY

BOX 35, DAWSON CREEK, BC

250.782.4671 | www.trynagowerphotography.com

Tryna Gower got her first camera when she was 17 and says she has been a shutterbug ever since. She took lessons at a local college then studied at the New York Institute of Photography.

Despite her passion for photography, Tryna says she never really wanted to make it her business because she was afraid it would lose its lustre. Eventually her friends convinced her to open a studio in 2000 but it wasn't until 2002 that she officially considered it launched. "I needed it to be flexible," she says.

Although there were photographers in the area doing the usual "say cheese" family shots, Tryna says she was the first in her area to start a home-based photography business and the first to be mobile. That meant she was able to develop her name and reputation before similar photography studios opened up. She now has a full indoor studio facility and a full outdoor studio with breathtaking views.

At first, business was very slow. "Basically, I didn't make any money for the first four years," she says. "I never got a loan; I bought everything with cash. I was lucky I didn't have to work for income. Now I'm making money."

Her advice to potential entrepreneurs: "Learn basic business skills. There's a difference between learning your craft and learning basic business skills; you need both."

The flexible hours Tryna's business offers work well for her. She values her relationship with her husband and her children and never misses the opportunity to be with them for the "important" things. "I'm a person full of zigs and zags. I can't work 9 to 5 so this works for me. Sometimes I'm in my studio at midnight working."

"My business looks 10 times better now than when I planned it eight years ago," she says. "I'm doing more artistic photographs and leaning towards doing photography for publishing and printing. It's a much bigger scale."

"Learn basic business skills.

There's a difference between learning your craft and learning basic business skills; you need both."



Tryna Gower

“I’m a person full of zigs and zags. I can’t work 9 to 5 so this works for me. Sometimes I’m in my studio at midnight working”

Alex Zander



Angelique Levac

ANGELIQUE'S NATIVE ARTS
433 GEORGE STREET, PRINCE GEORGE, BC
250.561.2339 | www.angeliquesnativeart.com

Angelique Levac has found a business she can really sink her teeth into, literally.

She first became intrigued in the 1980's when she read about a Cree woman who wanted to pass on the ancient art of birch bark biting. After many arduous trips and lessons, Angelique became a skilled craftsperson, one of only three women in Canada today who practice the art of birch bark biting, which involves folding and biting the innermost layer of select birch bark into a variety of forms.

Despite discouragement from various family members and friends along the way, she held fast to her dream and it has paid off.

In 1992, the uniqueness of her art caught the eye of Bill Cosby who asked Angelique to appear on the television game show "You Bet Your Life". Angelique won \$12,600 and put the money towards a van so she could travel to various native craft shows and sell her artwork. By 1994 Angelique had saved another \$4,000 and used it to open Angelique's Native Arts where she showcases her bitings, earrings, her sister's moose hair tuftings and small carvings. She buys art for her store from local

artists whenever she can.

"I've learned a lot about the industry and what sells over the last 14 years," she says. Angelique's success is both personal and professional. "People tell me that I have proven that our people can do anything. I like being an inspiration to others. I like being able to carry on the work of other native artists."

Angelique, whose artwork was recently featured in Homemaker's magazine and the Globe and Mail, is now a leader in her community, with compassion for other people and a willingness to try anything.

"Be willing to take the time to make your business grow."

“No matter what anybody tells you, if they try to discourage you, never take them seriously. The sky is the limit; you can do anything you set your mind to.”

Lila Tomlinson

AGRI-GREEN BIODIESEL INC.

SPARWOOD, BC

250.423.7205 | www.agr-greenbiodiesel.com

With increasing concerns about the environment and rising gas prices, could the concept of a 'fuel U-brew' really be that far-fetched? Lila Tomlinson didn't think so. Her company, Agri-Green Biodiesel, which produces and distributes biodiesel fuel, has recently opened a U-brew that will teach people how to make their own.

Lila first thought about making biodiesel in late 2002. Her young son had allergies and she and her husband Gary had been told to get rid of their old carpets. They took a closer look at all the other allergens and contaminants that could be lurking in their home and in their immediate environment and decided to make some changes.

"We've been made more aware of what we are doing to our environment," she says.

"We've always driven diesel," she says and became interested in biodiesel as a healthier alternative. But the nearest manufacturer of biodiesel was in Saskatchewan and the nearest distributor was in Vancouver, so they began making it at home. They soon realized making small batches was not economically feasible, so they incorporated in early 2005 and opened up a shop in late 2006.

Lila, who has an accounting designation and a strong concern for the environment, says she has also learned a lot about how provincial and federal governments are helping — and how they're lacking — with regard to environmental matters. "It's more lucrative being a manufacturer in the States. Being in Canada, it is cheaper to be a distributor," she says.

Lila gets her entrepreneurial inspiration from her mother who raised a family and worked outside the home. "Family was always first with her," she says, "keeping the family unit intact no matter what. An entrepreneur is someone who sees possibilities where others don't and is willing to do something with their beliefs and to act on them," she says.

Lila also credits Sasha Galt, who spoke at a Women's Enterprise Centre workshop in Cranbrook, with some useful advice: "Make sure you have lots of room on your credit cards because you're going to need it."

"We've been made more aware of what we are doing to our environment."



Vanessa Croome, Clarismedia

“Don't do something unless you are in love with it because it will become your world. You dream about it, talk about it, live it ...”

Khue Bul



Ellen Melcosky

LITTLE MISS CHIEF GOURMET PRODUCTS INC.
WESTBANK, BC
250.768.6977 | www.littlemisschief.com

Unlike many entrepreneurs, raising money to start her venture wasn't a problem for Ellen Melcosky, owner of Little Miss Chief Gourmet Products, Inc. "I had money coming in before I even had the product ready," she says. "Banks still wouldn't look at me because I was a First Nations woman and had no equity."

Ellen started her business in 1994 after raising her family. Her friends encouraged her to go into business so she decided to produce smoked salmon using all natural ingredients and the methods she learned from her mother, a hunter skilled in food preservation.

"My vision was to break into the local market in the Okanagan," she says, but she didn't want her business to grow too quickly. She got a loan from Women's Enterprise Centre and sold \$200K in the first year. Her products are now sold across Canada and around the world.

Ellen was the first First Nations woman to develop such a business in the Okanagan. She is also the first smoked salmon producer to use Okanagan white wine in her marinades.

"I used to be such a shy person and never thought I'd be

able to speak to people like I do now," she says. "I found out I had to get out there if I was going to succeed."

The first time she was invited to be on television, she was worried sick. "Then it started and I was fine and now I've been on a lot of TV shows around Canada."

Ellen believes an entrepreneur must be willing to work long hours, continually update her business plan and understand her current market while pursuing new ones.

"Be proud of who you are and give back to the world what you've received," she says. "Mother Earth has given us so much."

*"Listen to your elders; they have something to teach you.
And never give up on your dream."*

“Banks still wouldn't look at me because I was a First Nations woman and had no equity”

Brenda Palmer

MRS. PALMER'S PANTRY

236 SLATER ROAD, CRANBROOK, BC

250.426.1151 | www.mrspalmerspantry.com

Adversity is the mother of invention they say and Brenda Palmer faced plenty of adversity when she decided to reinvent herself and make a better life for her children.

In 1995, Brenda, a Metis woman, had just had her fourth child and was in a highly dysfunctional marriage. She left the marriage and started a new life investing everything she had into her small company, Mrs. Palmer's Pantry.

She ran her business part time for about seven years. "Then I decided it was time to go big or go home," she says. In the beginning, she made pepper jellies and antipastos, but now she is almost entirely focused on pita chip snacks. "The pita chips have taken over the business," she says.

Mrs. Palmer's Pantry pita chips are oven-baked with zero trans fat, all natural ingredients and no additives. "Our chips are different because we make each pita individually," says Brenda. "Other pita chip makers just use broken up baked pitas." Brenda's tenacity has paid off as her company's pita chip snacks have just been approved as "healthy snacks" for sale in Canadian schools. "Getting them approved for sales in schools makes a positive statement of how we are helping our

nation grow healthier kids," she says. She also ships her pita chips as far as Hong Kong and they are available at Disney World in Florida.

Brenda says she was strongly influenced by her mom. "My mother never worked out of the home but she was very committed and loyal to what it was she was doing," she says. "That inspired me to make a good home life for my family."

"I've had a lot of blessings in my life and I now am able to go out and speak to people about what I've done and how I've done it," she says. "If I can motivate just one woman to change her own life and improve it then I've given back some of my blessings."

Brenda says she has an 'absolutely amazing' spouse now and her children know they can accomplish anything with their lives. "Seeing is believing," she says.

"Find something you love to do – do it wholeheartedly and stick to your principles as you do it."



Brenda Sawatsky

“I used to be afraid of my own shadow and now I am able to speak in front of groups and tell my story. I have more confidence and pride in myself.”



Lynn Pont

DENIM PINE PRODUCTS CORP.
PEACHLAND, BC
www.denimpine.com

Even the most brilliant business ideas sometimes get tied up in knots. Lynn Pont discovered how tenacious an entrepreneur has to be soon after she thought of trademarking the words 'Denim Pine'™ in 2001 for use by value-added wood product manufacturers.

Lynn had worked with wood product manufacturers in northern BC as a marketing rep and she knew how the pine beetle was devastating the entire industry. Small manufacturers were struggling with the new reality that beetles had infested much of the province's forests and the wood they left behind was considered ruined. Although its yellow hue is marred with gray-blue stains, similar to the colour of denim, the wood is still structurally sound.

In 2002, Lynn formed a non-profit society and gave them the rights to use the name. Then the problems developed: it quickly appeared that the term 'denim pine' was going to be the new generic name adopted by the media and general public for beetle-infested wood. If that happened Lynn knew manufacturers wouldn't pay to license the trademark 'denim pine' because it was already in common use.

In addition, she faced some opposition to her trademark from the BC lumber industry and other officials and that made it difficult for her to sell the licenses in BC. Then her webhost went under and she couldn't access her website to update and make changes for several months.

Lynn pulled back for two years thinking about how to start over. Influenced by her mother, "a very supportive, very insightful woman with very strong intuition," Pont was not going to wait around for someone to show her what to do, because she knew there was marketing potential for this product.

She realized that there were companies in other parts of North America and the world who were manufacturing products using the pine beetle wood and they were anxious to obtain a license to use her trademarked term 'denim pine'. Lynn changed her business strategy and revamped her whole plan. Now, she owns the company and is focusing on wood manufacturing companies outside of BC and Canada who use pine beetle infested lumber. Suddenly, she's on a smooth plane again.

"It was an opportunity where I could see the future."

“You gotta be 20 people
at once...
that was stressful, I thought”

Teena Legris

NIMA'MA MATERNITY INC.
2938 WEST 4TH AVENUE, VANCOUVER, BC
604.734.8800 | www.nimama.ca

Teena Legris opened Nima'ma Maternity in April 2008, a high end boutique that offers pre- and post-maternity apparel, organic skin care and cosmetics, jewellery and accessories. Teena was inspired to open Nima'ma during her pregnancy as she found it difficult to buy attractive, quality maternity apparel in Vancouver.

The name "Nima'ma" means "My Mother" in her birth mother's Woodland Cree dialect. Teena feels the name reveres motherhood and the environment, as the store also carries many organic products. The concept behind Nima'ma is to create a versatile and beautiful wardrobe celebrating maternal femininity. It has also been well-received by women who aren't pregnant and by those wanting to find quality organic apparel collections such as local designer Lav & Kush.

As a first-time mother, Teena experienced her share of challenges during the process of opening Nima'ma including project financing rejections, real estate agents scoffing at her business viability, health problems and the collapse of a business partnership.

Through perseverance and a strong conviction in her business concept, Teena won second place at the Small Business BC Business Plan Competition in February 2008 and with her family's support, Teena opened for business 18 months later.

Nima'ma's unique interior is designed for families and replicates the clean lines of an art gallery with crisp, white decor with two "Nima'ma green" accent walls, spacious high ceilings and custom built white displays. Two extra large dressing rooms were designed to accommodate strollers and a customer-accessible washroom next to the dressing rooms includes a built-in change table and wipes. For toddlers, the colourful blocks offer some playful distractions so that mothers may shop for clothes.

Teena admits that her aunt Celine, who owns Celine Interiors and helped design the inside of Teena's store, was a strong female role model. "She's an intelligent woman who has always conveyed a strong sense of confidence and creativity. I knew at six years of age that I not only wanted to have her sense of style but to one day develop a smart and tenacious perspective like her in my personal and business life. She and my uncle have both been instrumental in offering their support in my personal and business growth which is an incredible gift."

"I've never worked so hard in my life but I'm proud to say that the feedback and response from families across Canada and abroad have made it all worthwhile."



Adriene Thiessen, Gemini Visuals

“If you truly believe in your business concept and back it up with a strong business plan and financials - and have the drive to make it succeed - you can and will make it happen”



“Being self-employed is a struggle but it is such a rewarding gift: to be able to share your talent with others”

Leanne Helin

LEANNE HELIN TSIMSHIAN NATIVE JEWELLERY
2700 LANA ROAD, NANOOSE BAY, BC
250.468.9299 | www.leannehelin.com

Sometimes, it takes a bit of time and a little push to find your niche. Leanne Helin tried chef training and then worked in the fishing industry, before she found hers.

Coming back to work at her family's native art gallery in French Creek, her brother Bill, who was an artist, encouraged Leanne to try creating jewellery, even offering to help her learn the traditional Tsimshian form. “Being an urban Indian, I was far away from my homeland influences of the art,” she says. “He helped me get back to my artistic roots and he was my teacher.”

By 1987, Leanne thought she could make a business of it. “My parents were my stabilizers,” says Leanne. With her family 100 per cent behind her, she completed a jewellery repair program in California and was in full production by 1989.

Leanne's business concept has matured over the years. “When I first started, I just did bulk orders with no thought of who they would go to,” she says. “Then I realized the great rewards in doing custom orders and working one-on-one with people, so they feel empowered wearing a piece that I've made and created with them and for them.”

Since starting the business, Leanne feels she has become more self-confident, both in her business and in her personal life. While the success of the business has allowed her to achieve creative and financial independence and bring pleasure to others through her creations, it has also provided an opportunity for her to be at home with her son.

Leanne believes entrepreneurs need perseverance, a strong belief in their abilities and faith in a higher power. While her family background pulled her into the business, Leanne didn't know if she had any artistic ability until her brother pushed her to making jewellery. “Try it all,” she advises. “Seek every avenue to open up your areas of creativity.”

“There were not a lot of women doing native jewellery art then and there still aren't today.”