Telling Their Stories

WOMEN BUSINESS OWNERS
IN WESTERN MAINE
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EDITED BY
Jo Josephson, Western Mountains Alliance
IN COLLABORATION WITH
Ellen Golden, Coastal Enterprises, Inc.
Lee Sharkey, University of Maine at Farmington
AND
Jocelyn Barrett, Amanda Coffin, Jessica Dafni,
Ally Day, Aileen Dinsmore, Samantha DePoy,
Alison Duncan, Bianca Garber, Crystal Hawley,
Tessa Parmenter, Shelli-Jo Pelletier,
Sarah Rusin-Dickens, Christine Steele

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Portraits by Jo Josephson

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Cover
180° view of Mooselookmeguntic Lake from
Bald Mountain, Rangeley
Page 6
Cascade, Farmington
Page 8
City block on Main Street, Farmington
Page 55
Ski trail at Sunday River
Page 56-57
360° view of Moosehead Lake and surrounding region
from Kineo Mountain tower
Page 62
City block on Main Street, Farmington

CEI COASTAL ENTERPRISES, INC.
36 Water Street, P.O. Box 268, Wiscasset, Maine 04578
207-882-7552 • cei@ceimaine.org • www.ceimaine.org
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Jo Josephson
Editor
CONTENTS

PAGE 8–11

The Project
An overview of the Telling Their Stories Project, a collaborative undertaking in which students at the University of Maine at Farmington recorded the stories of women who established successful businesses in rural communities throughout the Western Maine region.

PAGE 12–54

The Stories
Thirteen stories – edited for publication – with excerpts from the student’s weekly journals. For the unedited stories: www.westernmountainsalliance.org

PAGE 55–62

What We Heard
Excerpts from the stories highlighting the themes that emerged, the challenges faced, and the choices and changes made as part of establishing and growing a business in a sparsely populated, four-county region.
THE STORIES

PAGE 14–17
Nina Gianquinto
Specialty Foods under a Purple Rooftop

PAGE 18–20
Karen King and Lisa Burns
Two Women with a Tractor

PAGE 21–23
Susun Terese
Warm Clothing Manufactured by Minikins

PAGE 24–26
Jane Barron
Camping Gear by Alder Stream Canvas

PAGE 27–29
Katenia Keller
All Manner of Movement with Flying Feet

PAGE 30–33
Carolann Ouellette
Fine Dining in a Frontier Town

PAGE 34–36
Carole Duplessis
Greenhouses at the Edge of a National Forest

PAGE 37–39
Nancy Marshall
The Woman Who Markets Maine

PAGE 40–42
Barbara Joseph
A Holistic Approach to Relaxing Mind and Body

PAGE 43–45
Corinne Leary
Digging in the Dirt

PAGE 46–48
Donna Hathaway
With a Passion for Puzzles

PAGE 49–51
Wendy Newmeyer
Packaging the Fragrant Tips of Firs

PAGE 52–54
Sylvia Black
Growing Tourism in the North with a B & B
The Project

“It was very important for me to do something that wouldn’t be stepping on someone else’s toes. I wanted to complement the existing downtown, to diversify it. I hoped to attract businesses that would complement mine so we could work together as retailing neighbors.

“For two years I had to work a second job. I would use the money I made one week to buy inventory the next week. That approach felt like the right way. It would have been more stressful to have the debt of a business loan.”

Nina Gianquinto, owner of upfront and pleasant gourmet, Farmington

The owner of a successful specialty food store, Nina Gianquinto is one of fourteen businesswomen whose stories of collaborative and creative entrepreneurship in rural communities in Western Maine are highlighted in this publication. These are stories of challenge, choice, and change reflecting the realities of a region that includes 12,000 square miles of spectacular lakes, mountains and forests and less than 150,000 people, where the loss of the traditional industrial and agricultural base has resulted in an economy in transition.

The business owners and their businesses are diverse. They include: two women with a tractor who bring an environmental sensibility to an earth moving business; a designer and manufacturer of Polarfleece® clothing who creates home-based employment for rural women while selling her products via the internet; a woman who went from marketing a ski resort to marketing the whole state of Maine; a classically-trained dancer who, thanks to public support of the arts, teaches rural youngsters to express themselves through dance; and a woman who saw opportunity in the tips of fir trees and manufactures fragrant pillows and draft stoppers for retailers across the country.

The stories were collected by students enrolled in a course offered by the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) during the 2003 academic year. Not all of the students were majoring in Women’s Studies; one was majoring in community health, another in psychology, several were creative writing majors. However, all responded to the opportunity offered in a flyer posted on campus:

Put classroom learning to work in the field
Interview women in Western Maine who are making a difference
Work independently and cooperatively with other students
Write for publication
Contribute to the economic development of the region
Telling Their Stories: A Collaborative Undertaking

Where did this opportunity come from? The opportunity was the result of collaboration involving three partners: Western Mountains Alliance (WMA), a private non-profit economic development organization, housed on the UMF campus, that works with rural communities throughout Western Maine; the Women's Studies Program at the University of Maine at Farmington, a highly respected public liberal arts college which offers an interdisciplinary major and minor in Women's Studies; and Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI), a private non-profit community development corporation based in Wiscasset, with a long history of supporting women-owned businesses throughout the state.

The project was inspired by a CEI publication Making a Difference: Women Business Owners in Maine 2001. Developed under the leadership of CEI Senior Program Officer Ellen Golden, it contained the results of a survey of three hundred randomly selected women business owners statewide and underscored the growing financial contributions of Maine businesswomen to the state's economy.

The Center for Women's Business Research had previously reported that there were 63,049 women-owned businesses in Maine, employing 75,214 people, and generating $9.1 billion in annual sales and that Maine ranked 35th in the nation in the overall growth of women-owned businesses. The CEI report provided a closer look. It found that the median household income of Maine women business owners was about $20,000 greater than that of Maine households in general, that more than half of the businesses provided 50 percent or more of that household income, and that nearly half of the businesses had been profitable in each of the past five years.

For Golden, the implications of CEI's study were clear. The women were making significant contribution to the Maine economy and to the well-being of their families. They were creating income and employment and providing valued goods and services to their customers. Investing in this sector made sense in the context of the ongoing need to spur economic development statewide.

When WMA's Jo Josephson read CEI's report in 2002, the former journalist saw the potential of “putting a regional face” on CEI's report by collecting the stories of women business owners in the remote four counties served by the Alliance. With CEI endorsement, Josephson turned to the University of Maine at Farmington with the hope of involving students in the project. UMF President Theo Kalikow directed her to the Women's Studies Program and faculty member Lee Sharkey. The students could be taught by Sharkey to collect the stories.

It is perhaps important to note that the three organizations had existing relationships through previous collaborative efforts and board representation. For all three, the project was an opportunity. For CEI, the project was a way to continue to build the organization's identity in the region, to inspire other women to embrace entrepreneurship and to make visible to policy makers the contributions of women business owners in rural Maine. For WMA, the project was an opportunity to identify and celebrate home-grown models of entrepreneurial success and help build the capacity of businesses throughout the region. For UMF, the project was an opportunity to strengthen the ties between the college and the community and a mechanism to teach students to use the tools of feminist oral history and to understand the role business plays in women's lives.

Over two years, a course was developed, students recruited, business owners identified, the stories collected and, unexpectedly, a model developed that attracted national attention.

Nuts and Bolts: Selecting the Businesses

Who better to identify the women business owners whose stories would be told than women business owners themselves? Eight women, two from each of the four counties served by WMA: Oxford, Franklin, Somerset and Piscataquis, were recruited to form the Telling Their Stories Advisory Committee. They were asked to develop a pool of candidates for the project.

Long-time residents of the region, the advisors came from the profit and non-profit world and knew the region's businesses. In fact, some owned businesses and were eventually interviewed as part of the project. While the committee worked intensely to create a framework for selecting the businesses, they also provided the names and backgrounds of no less than sixty business owners as candidates for the project. Last but not least, they developed a list of questions they thought important for the students to ask.

In creating a framework for selecting the businesses, the committee suggested that:

The stories should capture the positive pulse of the region, demonstrate the region's capacity to innovate, inspire, and contribute to policy development.
The owners need not be native-born, but should have started their businesses in Maine and have demonstrated a commitment to their communities. The owners should have diverse backgrounds and training. The businesses should be diverse in terms of type, sector, structure and business models, but all should exemplify good business practices with respect to sustainable development. The businesses should represent the region geographically. The businesses should have staying power.

In identifying themes for guiding the interviews with the business women, the committee suggested that the students focus on:

- the motivation and circumstances that prompted the start-up of the business;
- the resources that supported the development of the business;
- the role luck, perseverance, risk-taking, and timing played in the overall success of the business;
- the relationships that helped start and sustain the businesses; and
- the women's views on growth and their definition of success.

Designing the Course

While the list of businesses was being whittled down and the questions were being drawn up, Sharkey began to design the course, with input from Golden on women's entrepreneurship and from Josephson on the economic history of the region. The course reflected Sharkey's personal and professional commitment to feminist oral history and the commitment of the discipline of women's studies to linking theory and practice.

Students started by grounding themselves in the principles of feminist oral history and learning about issues surrounding women's entrepreneurship. Each student then spent the rest of the semester developing an oral history of a single businesswoman. The students were expected to prepare the oral histories for publication. Sharkey believed that in the process, they would claim a voice in the public sphere: a difficult step for many undergraduates, particularly young women.

Fundamental to feminist oral history is the principle that the person being interviewed determines the agenda, while the interviewer is expected to shape the narrative in collaboration with the interviewee, in a process termed “returning the research.” In this case, each account would reflect the business owner, revealing what she did and how it affected her sense of herself.

The course was structured as a group independent study project combining the self-direction and responsibility of independent study with the sense of collaborating in a larger enterprise that develops in the best of classroom seminars. The group met for just an hour and a half a week with a mandatory weekly conference with an instructor. The instruction was also a collaboration involving Sharkey, Josephson and a teaching assistant, Jocelyn Barrett, who had worked closely with Sharkey throughout her undergraduate career and undertook a pilot oral history prior to launching the course in the spring semester. Thus, a student took a lead in the process and became a mentor for the other students.

The requirements for Barrett's pilot oral history became the basic requirements of the course: read general and subject specific background material, conduct and transcribe two lengthy interviews with the businesswoman, develop an oral history through drafts for publication, give a public presentation of the project, and keep a journal of impressions of every step in the process.

A fall semester with eight new students, taught by Josephson and a teaching assistant, Alison Duncan, a student from the spring semester, concluded the course.

The Students’ Stories

It is impossible to record the full impact of the project on the students, but the excerpts from their journals included alongside the stories provide an inkling of what the experience meant to them. In journal after journal, the students expressed concern that they tell accurately the stories of the women they had come to respect. They rewrote the stories till they felt they had gotten it right.

They were also surprised. They had not anticipated the effect the course would have on their own lives. For many, the women became role models because of the risks they took and their perseverance in following their passions. One gained self confidence from overcoming her fears of leaving the classroom, interviewing a stranger and writing about “a person much older and more mature than I.” Another drew inspiration from a story of “going against the grain, not belonging and then finding your place.” Several gained appreciation for what business owners had gone through to get where they are; one connected this to her own mother.
Several gained insights into their future careers as writers. A student majoring in community health saw the possibilities of a career as a holistic health practitioner and spoke of the women she interviewed as an “inspiring mentor.” She went on to take a course from her. Last but not least, all the students were affected by going out into the real world and putting their academic skills to practical use.

At the outset the students saw themselves as story collectors. However, as they interviewed the business owners, communicated with them about interviews and transcripts, and transitioned from transcript to written narrative, they found their own voices were necessary to set the tone and context for the business owners’ stories. The conversation between them became part of the story, and each story came to reflect the voices of not one but two storytellers.

Sharing the Stories

In January 2004, just weeks after the students turned in their final drafts, the Telling Their Stories Project was invited to tell its story at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities in Washington, D.C. Representing the project on a panel entitled “Innovative Uses of Service Learning and Other Teaching Strategies to Promote Civic Engagement” were Sharkey, Josephson, Barrett, and student Amanda Coffin. In addition to describing the process of moving from the initial concept to the design and delivery of the course and the development of the stories for publication, the panelists shared some of what they had learned from their involvement in the project.

Sharkey told the audience of her skepticism when the project was first presented to her:

Let me say at the outset that the project of collecting the histories of women business owners was not an obvious fit for this old socialist. My suspicion of the profit motive got between me and an appreciation of what might be inspiring about women slashing their way through the jungle of free enterprise. What it took to break down my stereotype was a single meeting of the Telling Their Stories Advisory Committee, in which the business owners sitting around the table began to tell their stories.

All of the women described how building their businesses had resulted in new capabilities and self-knowledge – the very process of growth and discovery progressive academics hope a college education will afford our students. By the time I left the meeting, I saw that the Telling Their Stories Project was an opportunity to engage students in the kind of self-directed feminist education I have long been committed to and look for opportunities to facilitate.

The impact on the students was as profound. Amanda Coffin noted in her presentation that “Each of us felt like we had a great responsibility not only to our instructor but to the women we were representing…. Quoting from classmate Samantha DePoy’s journal, Amanda summed up the feeling of all her classmates: “It wasn’t just turning in a fifteen-page paper; it was capturing the life of women we cared about deeply and were proud of and, most importantly, women we respected and wanted to be like.”

Reflecting on her experience, Jocelyn Barrett noted, “I now believe in the concept of oral histories as a tool to influence the development of policies and attitudes that empower people. It is an intriguing idea for me; it is the culmination of my undergraduate education and helps me explore the question of whose story gets told, and to what end.”
These are the stories of women business owners who followed their passion, recognized and seized opportunities, drew on conventional and unconventional resources, developed unique strategies for survival, made fiscally conservative choices and took calculated risks. These are stories of women who are successful and who define success as more than money. Success is about doing what they love and about relationships with customers, community and each other. Briefly, this is who they are:
Nina Gianquinto is the owner of Upfront and Pleasant Gourmet, a specialty food shop in Farmington (pop. 7,092). She started the business in 1992, after graduating from the University of Maine at Farmington and after years of being a waitress in a local restaurant.

As you step into Up Front and Pleasant Gourmet, you are struck by the smell of freshly brewed coffee and the sight of a table laden with jars of dark coffee beans. Then there are the walls. Trimmed with stenciled purple grape clusters, Nina’s color and logo, they are lined with wooden shelves fully stocked with whatever you could need or want: olive oil, vinegar, tea, ginger, pasta, chocolate bars and wine. It’s all there. It’s hard to know where to look first, but there is no time to be overwhelmed; a petite lady with long dark hair and energetic green eyes greets you as she emerges from behind her large deli case. She offers you coffee with a warm smile and makes sure you are able to find the cream and sugar. She is Nina Gianquinto, the owner. After fixing yourself coffee, you wander around the small store. The boards of the worn wooden floor creak beneath your feet as you take in all there is to see, smell and hear. Others come and go, discussing local news or delivering fresh goods. Nina helps you. Whether you don’t know what you’re looking for, or know exactly what you’re looking for, Nina takes the time to help you find it.

How it All Started
As a junior in high school and the youngest of five children, Nina moved with her parents from Long Island, New York to Norway, Maine when they retired. To remain close to them, she went to the University of Maine at Farmington and found herself falling in love with the college town.

“I came to UMF in 1977 to study English. I needed a side job to pay my bills and ended up, as many college students do, at one of the local restaurants, Fiddleheads. I started in the kitchen first, chopping vegetables, washing dishes, doing anything I could to get my foot in the door. I was in that restaurant for almost fifteen years, through three different owners. The longer I was there, the more I realized my love for food and its effect on people: their unique habits, wants, needs, and desires.

“I came from a major foody family. The celebration of food was a big part of my life. It was a big factor in my growing up. There was a lot of schmoozing going on around
the dining table too, which helps me in my store, because I grew up that way, talking to people and sharing at the table. I thought it would be nice to be self-employed and try to fill a niche in the community I wasn’t seeing addressed yet: to provide things not available in the supermarkets and the local health food store. My store is where the treats are. I wanted it to be fun. I wanted it to be what food is: a part of love and life.”

**Peter, Paul and Nina**

*Though the buildings Nina purchased are three separate units, they were sold as one. Nina took one unit to start Up Front and Pleasant Gourmet. The monthly rent of her neighbors and tenants contributed to the mortgage payment and other bills.*

“I was a waitress, bartender, hostess and dining room manager at Fiddleheads Restaurant when three buildings on a side street came onto the market. That was a big deal for me because I had been looking on Main Street for many years to rent and rents were exorbitant. I had developed such a love for this area. I knew this is where I wanted to be. I just had to figure out how it was going to work.

“I drove by those three sad, little, decrepit buildings for fifteen years, thinking how precious they were. Luck was a great factor in that the buildings were available when they were. I was able to buy them through Norway Savings Bank. The president of the bank was a neighbor and a very good friend, so I didn’t see him as this big hat in a chair. I had some personal savings to use as a down payment and I also put my home in Temple up for collateral. I had a minuscule mortgage on it and signed it off to borrow.

“With the three buildings, I started Front Street Rentals, which is now one residence, one garage, and two commercial storefronts on either side of my own. It’s a lot to maintain, but it’s manageable. I’ve always had one business to bounce off the other. The old expression of taking from your family and others from her childhood. She has carried these impressions with her and puts them to practice in her business and lifestyle.

“My parents instilled a very strong sense of honesty, responsibility and work ethic in me. My father was a general practitioner in New York; his business was in our home. He had a great system of fairness. He would barter his medical services to people. If you could afford to pay him, he would deliver your baby and let you pay him. If you couldn’t afford to pay him in cash, what his service was worth to you and what yours was worth to him would be the way he would do business with you. It was very much a part of me growing up, seeing business done in a fair and honest manner. It is a big factor in that the buildings were available when they were. Luck was a great factor in that the buildings were available when they were. I was able to buy them through Norway Savings Bank. The president of the bank was a neighbor and a very good friend, so I didn’t see him as this big hat in a chair. I had some personal savings to use as a down payment and I also put my home in Temple up for collateral. I had a minuscule mortgage on it and signed it off to borrow.

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“As a risk taker, I gambled on not knowing exactly what I was getting into when I started. I didn’t have a lot of expectations. I never went into business for financial reasons. For me, financial success is being able to sustain my two businesses, pay my bills. I don’t draw a paycheck with my name on it. I make ends meet every month and week out of those businesses. I don’t have to work full-time elsewhere now to supplement my income, but if I’m asked to cater or bartend, I do not say ‘no.’ If I’m offered a job as a complement or a ‘garnish’ to my income, I take it.”

“The real success is hearing people returning time and time again and enjoying shopping. Whether it’s comforting, fun or informative, it’s that people are enjoying themselves and the door is opening and things are going out the door. I’ve always wanted it to be a welcoming place for people, not an intimidating place. That’s the success, the door opens and people come.”

**Mentors and Other Influences**

*Nina has mostly been influenced by her family and others from her childhood. She has carried these impressions with her and puts them to practice in her business and lifestyle.*

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**Success**

*For Nina, success is not becoming rich or famous. She sustains herself doing what she loves. Passion for her business brings joy to others, and to Nina, that is success.*

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way and having barter be as acceptable as cash.

“Now, since I have a store and my dentist loves to shop here, he has worked out a partial barter system with me. It’s incredible because my father’s services were once available in that way and my dentist feels my service is worth enough that he’ll outright trade or exchange.

“There was this man I remember as a child, in New York. His shop was called Bill’s Butcher, and Bill is another person who influenced me. I had great respect for him because he would take the time to make us feel welcome. If my store closes at five and I’m there until seven, the lights are on and the sign is ‘open.’ I do not go in the back room and work without letting customers know that the whole shop is still open and more than ready to greet you.”

Fair and Quality Service

Nina goes above and beyond for her customers. She takes time to help people find exactly what they need. She sells dated products half-price, at a loss, and sometimes even gives them away. Though money is lost, because the product is enjoyed and not wasted, Nina does not consider it a loss.

“I’ll sell one egg, a half a loaf of bread, a scoop of coffee. If you want anything a knife can cut and a scale will register, we’ll sell it. No matter what you want, we’re here to help you figure out the amount or measurement that’s going to work for you. We’ll sell you exactly as much as you need. We’re willing to spend time, willing to talk to you, let you taste things.

“I have been told my nurturing qualities are very apparent through the way I take care of my customers. I have mothering instincts and I like to take care of people. That persona requires a certain amount of energy and a genuine love for people, because you can’t fake it and if you do, they know it.”

Going With Gut and Growing Slowly

Nina used her “gut” to develop a basic list of inventory she needed to open her store, mostly things she had difficulty finding locally. She kept preparations simple, meeting basic requirements for the State to issue a wine license and for companies to distribute to her. She chose to grow slowly — purchasing inventory on a weekly basis rather than going into debt with a small business loan — and continues to stay small.

“For two years I had to work a second job. I would use the money I made one week to buy inventory the next week. I would seek out companies that sell less than twelve of something. It allowed me to diversify and not tie up money in twelve of something and then have no one be responsive to it. Gut-wise, that approach felt like the right way. It would have been more stressful to have the debt of a business loan.

“I try to be aggressive and try new things. I tend to want more room, but I have walked into bigger shops that aren’t well filled and I don’t like the way it looks. I can fill my space and consistently keep it looking full, even through periods of low inventory. People say, ‘Get a bigger place, get a few tables, make a few sandwiches, it would be nice.’ I don’t want a cafe. If I got a bigger space, it would be for more and diversified inventory.

“Even though it’s ten years plus, the space is still workable. It’s intimate, charming, and looks full, which is the appeal. I have a scale, a grinder, a coffee maker and some refrigeration. The only reason those appliances were allowed through the door was because I needed them. I am allergic to technology. I don’t even have a cash register. It’s a cash box, but it might as well be a cigar box. It’s what I know and what I’m comfortable with, which is why I do it.”

Challenges

Nina perseveres through many challenges related to her rural location. Several electrical outages have caused her deli case to lose refrigeration and its entire contents have been taken to the dump. In addition to events such as these, she faces the daily challenges of providing customers with their requests and finding companies that will distribute to her.

“My glass is three-quarters full and I try not to dwell on the negative. I did receive negative input in the beginning. People stopped me on the street and said, ‘How can you even attempt this? You must be crazy. How could you ever think in a million years an idea like this could work?’ I thought, ‘I’ve got to try it; it’s my idea.’
"I opened two weeks before Christmas. It was very empty, but at Christmas, even though there was hardly anything on the shelves, people were extremely responsive, and what was there sold. It wasn’t very busy in the beginning, but it wasn’t ever so slow that I gave up hope. I never thought, ‘This isn’t going to work.’

The biggest challenge in starting my own business has been finding distributors to consistently provide diversified inventory to me in this part of the state. There’s a lot out there we can’t get. I seek out companies who will care for my needs; I’m not attracted to those that won’t consider doing something smaller.”

Community

Interaction with the community is vital to the survival of Nina’s businesses. It’s through collaboration, not competition, with other businesses that Nina succeeds. She supports her community and they support her.

“IT was very important for me to do something that wouldn’t be stepping on someone else’s toes. I wanted to complement the existing downtown, to diversify it. Something was generated by purchasing those buildings and breathing new life into them.

“The local health food store and I have been neighbors and friends for years. We call each other everyday to refer customers up and down the street and we’re very much in tune with each other. We’re fortunate to be near each other and to work together. We’re complementary and it’s worked out beautifully.

“The Braided Streams Gallery space, next door to me, was vacant for fifteen months before I filled it this last time. It was me being particular and having a vision. I hoped to complement me and my neighbor, Mainestone Jewelers, so we could work together as retailing neighbors.

“I’ve started asking my neighbors to go in on ads with me. It’s expanded our advertising because we don’t spend as much, but we appear in more places because of sharing. We individualize our own ads and they come under three peaks in the newspaper with, ‘Look for us under the purple rooftops, Front Street, Farmington.’ ”

Balance and Support

Nina has struck a working balance between her two businesses as well as her business and personal life. Running both businesses herself is difficult, especially during the holiday season. Because she arranges her own schedule, she is able to make time when she needs it.

“My support comes from my mom, my best friend, my boyfriend, Alan, and my cat. The holiday season is a very difficult time of year because I’m a stress monster and I live, eat and sleep Up Front and Pleasant Gourmet. It balances out and I’ve come to terms with that. There are worse things I could be doing. It’s the major push at the end of year that’s the destroyer of the personal life. My boyfriend can relate to that and I can relate to him because we both have those times, but we’re there for each other.

“Even if I couldn’t take a vacation unless I closed, I’d close. After Christmas and New Year, I shut down for five days and take a break. Those are nice times because I can be home. When I close, I don’t think about the store. I’m not wondering what’s going on there. I didn’t take many vacations when I first opened. I was probably six years into it before I did, but now closing down for a few days is a necessity. I have less free time because I run two businesses, but I also have more free time because I control my time. The days are long – it’s easier for me to go in at ten and stay until seven or eight than go in early. It’s a nice balance and it gives me some freedom.

“I perceive myself as a child at play combined with a woman trying to put in a decent days work. Retirement is a concept I can’t envision. I’m so much a worker in my heart, I always want to have my hand in some pot, some little soup spoon stirring around, whether landlord or merchant, it’s me trying to do something I love so I’m content at the end of the day.”

This is for something bigger than myself. It brings me great joy that Nina’s story is being told. And she’s excited about it too and realizes that she’s important. I think it has cast a light on how she functions in her community and that other women can learn from her. I’m amazed, truly, at what she’s done and the way she has carved this niche for herself and makes her passion work for her.
Lisa Burns and Karen King founded Cabins to Castles, a landscaping and shoreline erosion control business, in 1994 in the town of Denmark (pop. 901). They backed into the business while trying to pay for a tractor they had bought to do work around their new house.

Karen King and Lisa Burns
Two Women with a Tractor
BY SAMANTHA DEPOY

Karen King and Lisa Burns pack a one-two punch that’s more potent than Ali’s. Karen, jokingly, has dubbed it the “K and L Show.” Since 1994, when they took that intrepid leap of faith and entered a ring dominated by males, Cabins to Castles — which specializes in shoreline restoration, erosion control and landscaping — has grown from two women with a small tractor into two professionals who manage a year-round crew of three guys and a cache chock-full of high-end equipment. From pulling stumps in their friend’s backyard nearly ten years ago to now, when a typical day means orchestrating a project that will prevent a home from falling into a lake, the two have set a precedent to not only meet expectations, but to blow their clients right out of the water. Their hard work hasn’t gone unnoticed. In 1999, they were named Contractor of the Year by the International Erosion Control Association.

The business, run out of their home, which Karen built in the early 90’s, is open twenty-four hours a day, unless they decide to unplug the phone — which they never do. A phone call to Cabins to Castles is answered by Lisa, a warm woman with New England roots, Yankee ingenuity running through her veins and gray hair cascading down her strong back. She functions as the left-brain of the company, doing all the administrative work. The right brain is Karen who, as she reveals with a childlike glee, prefers to dig in the dirt. Karen has a no-nonsense air that allowed her to blend in with the professionals who rule the corporate world when she was an account executive in Florida, her home state. That’s where she met Lisa, who had migrated south to work as a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service.

With skyscrapers and spring-breakers closing in on them, the two headed north and settled in Denmark. Lisa continued to work for the postal service, while Karen worked with a three-man crew, trying her hand at construction, in preparation for building their own home. Over two years, she helped build seventeen houses. All the while, a bigger project was brewing as they searched for a more feasible and fulfilling path. Going into business for themselves seemed the viable option. Serendipitously, it started with a tractor that Karen needed for work around their house.
Laying the Groundwork

The two knew that if they made the investment in the tractor, they could find a way to make it pay for itself. “We bought it in the spring, and somebody asked if we could pull a couple stumps for them and that’s how we started. It left here and didn’t come back until October or November,” says Lisa. The rest is history, or, if you prefer, herstory.

The first year with the tractor was slow. Their clientele was comprised of supportive friends who generously helped spread the word, something that comes easily in a small community. From there, the legend of the two women with the tractor sold itself. “When you hear about something that’s sort of odd, word travels fast and it sticks in peoples’ heads. And women and tractors weren’t really something that go in the same sentence together,” Karen says.

Splitting Tasks, Giving Support

The first few years, Lisa and Karen were happy to take on whatever work came in. But as the workload rose, it became apparent the two needed to divide up the work. “Both of us are pretty opinionated; we both want to be right and we both want to do it our way,” says Karen. “It didn’t work anymore and so we had to decide, ‘Okay what are your areas of expertise and what are my areas of expertise?’ The reason we work so well together is because we have really divergent interests.” It also helps that Karen, at least according to Lisa, has a better sense of humor, which is more conducive to working in the field with a crew. “I can get frustrated pretty easily so it’s a good thing that she is the crew manager and I am the office manager.”

Being best friends and business partners means that Karen and Lisa rely heavily on each other. It’s a support system many business owners don’t have the luxury of having. “I’ve been up all night pacing and pacing and pacing and worrying about a job. ‘Oh my God, I’ve overestimated, how am I going to get through this job,’ ” says Karen. “As a friend, she can counsel me and calm me down and say ‘You know, it’s going to be all right, we’ve figured it out, look- let me run the numbers for you again and show you that it’s going to be okay.’ ”

Opting to run the business out of their home means it’s tough for Karen and Lisa to end the workday. Although they’ve tried to set limits, such as not answering the phone after a certain time or not talking about work at dinner, it’s not easy. “It’s not where you can leave the office and just leave it behind. It’s so interconnected with the office in the house. It’s all around all the time,” says Lisa.

Because their clients are mostly owners of second-homes, who are only there on the weekends and holidays, Karen and Lisa are always on call. “We work all week and then have to do consultations with clients on the weekends. We try to avoid it if at all possible, but sometimes there is just no way around it,” says Karen. “It’s hard to say no,” admits Lisa. “Usually when people call us it’s because they specifically want us and they are willing to wait for us to come to them. It’s nice to be in that position; it took us a long time to get there.”

Building a Foundation

Karen and Lisa are quick to acknowledge their employees—three year-round and two seasonal—when it comes to talking about the success of Cabins to Castles. As the client list grows, Karen is becoming more reliant on the crew and on a recently-hired foreman to handle the hands-on work in the field, while she moves back to the office and focuses more on the consultations with clients and design work.

For nearly ten years, she has worked building a crew. Now, Karen thinks she has the right people on board. They don’t have a complex about her giving the commands, or Lisa writing out the checks, but in a male-dominated field like earth-moving, it takes a special kind of employee to shrug off their skepticism and roll up their sleeves. “I really feel finally that my crew knows that we are here to stay and that we know what we are doing,” says Karen.

Karen and Lisa pride themselves on being supportive of their employees. “It’s a woman thing,”
they say. “With each individual I’ve had here, I’ve participated in some small way in their personal life, helping them out through a crisis, giving them time off, lending them some money.” However, sometimes Karen struggles when it comes to communicating with the crew. She’s thankful there is a foreman now that can run it. At some point though, she has to step in. “They’ll have some conflict among themselves because they are still learning to work together. I can’t skirt around these issues because I need to know this team is productive in the field,” she says candidly.

Satisfying the Land

For Karen and Lisa, nurturing the environment and serving as its steward isn’t just a job, it’s a responsibility, and a lifestyle. “There have always been earth-moving contractors doing work in environmentally sensitive areas. But it seemed that the bottom line was more important than the environment. The most important thing for our company is the protection of the environment. The second thing is what the client’s desires are for their project and the third thing is the regulations,” says Karen.

“I think it’s a cultural thing. Often a man’s approach is to knock it down and start over. It’s our belief that everything is connected. You don’t try to conquer it; you try to work with it. A lot of people are completely in their own little box; they don’t think about how what they do is connected to the big picture. The first thing we tell our clients, the first thing we are always looking out for here is the resource and protecting that. Then we’ll pick up on what they want to do.”

And Themselves

Karen and Lisa both believe their business is successful. For Lisa, the numbers cruncher, a positive balance in the bank is a good sign. “Although money isn’t everything, I feel that to be self-supporting, all along, is a measure of our success. Not to have to go deep into debt and wonder how we are ever doing to get out from under it. It’s been at a pretty even keel and we’ve grown smartly, I guess. We’ve never overextended ourselves and grown too fast and gotten into the bind that a lot of people do and then have to give up what they really love doing.”

For Karen, financial rewards have their merit, but in the end, client trust and glowing testimonials are equally important. “What makes us successful is that we are recognized by the authorities in the field. The International Erosion Control Association has recognized us as the Contractor of the Year,” Karen explains. “My peers tell me that we are successful. We know what we are doing. We are a company that does quality work. And that’s my measure of being successful.”

But sometimes they wonder. “I’ve gone through entire seasons wondering what I am doing this for because I can earn a good living doing any number of things,” says Karen. “But, that’s only because of the complications associated with running your own business. It’s not because I don’t like what I am doing because I do. I think it’s self-fulfilling in that you make your own accomplishments and by the same token, your faults or the things you do wrong or your inadequacies are your own also. Being able to set my standards high and reaching them, I think is what motivates me.”

Both see success differently, but both agree they have it.

As to the Future

As their crew begins to gel, the two will focus more on consulting than doing manual labor. With each day, Cabins to Castles becomes a stronger business. “It has its own life so to speak and a lot of time it’s very much like surfing in that you have to paddle really hard to stay ahead of the wave and stay in the right position so that we can use that momentum to help propel us further,” Karen says.

“There is the request out there for us to grow bigger, faster and meet that request but we’re just not ready to do that yet. Everyone wants it yesterday. We have to be up-front and honest enough that people understand you can’t be there but when we say we are going to, we do it. You have to be true to your word. And we’ve proven it time and time again and that’s really fueled our reputation.”
Susun Terese manufactures mittens, hats, jackets, bunting and blankets for children out of Polarfleece®. She began making clothing from the fabric to keep her daughter warm and opened her first store in Farmington (pop. 7,092) in 1988. Today she sells over the Internet and at trade shows throughout New England.

As soon as a customer walks through the door of Minikins, she is greeted by soft music and the sight of vibrant-colored, soft clothing. The smiling and gentle presence of Minikins’ Susun Terese only adds to the warm atmosphere.

Fifteen years ago, after days “searching through a thesaurus and dictionary” for just the right name for her new children’s clothing store, Susun lit upon “Minikin – a rare and delicate little creature.” She told herself, “That’s it.” Her store is filled with hats, scarves, mittens, gloves, bathrobes, socks, blankets and other items all made from Polarfleece®. It has the look of love.

Susun sewed at home and sold at craft fairs, before she opened her first store in 1988. “The idea that came to me for the business was a Polarfleece® baby hat that I saw in a store. At the time Polarfleece® was a very new fabric. I had a one-year-old daughter and I studied that hat like crazy. I then went home and I made one. I did it a bit differently and I thought ‘This is great! It’s cute, warm, soft, and this is Maine.’ I just thought every kid should have one.”

Susun started making the hat, called a balaclava, for kids. Soon after, she found herself making balaclavas for her husband and all of her husband’s friends. “It started as a business for kids and then I started making adult items. Making that one item and taking it to craft fairs was just the beginning.” Susun went from making hats to designing and making other clothing items, such as ponchos. “Ideas came from people asking for different items and my recognition that there was a world of things to be made. Polarfleece® was becoming a very popular fabric. I started designing new patterns or using patterns that already existed. I began making things that I saw a need for.”

Susun is, by her own definition, a risk taker, a trait that she says she may have acquired from her missionary father. “We moved every five years to a new town.” The family spent four years in Micronesia. “My years as a teenager in Micronesia hugely shaped my life. It allowed me to have a different perspective on things than someone who had grown up in the U.S.” In Micronesia, Susun and her family lived on very little, so it was partly through necessity that Susun learned how to sew.

After a stretch selling at craft fairs, Susun began to wonder how expensive it would be to rent a store in downtown
Susun Terese

Farmington. Through a local newspaper, she found a place to rent for $350 a month. “I thought, ‘All I have to do is make $350 a month, and I could do this.’ If it didn’t seem to be going anywhere, I could just go back home where I was before.” Three years later, a vacancy occurred on Main Street. “It was $750 a month and I was at a place where I went ‘I could do that, if that’s all I have to make!’ So I just went to the landlord and told him I wanted it. I just fell into it, by luck and guts.”

Now, when she looks back, Susun says, “I believe that things happen for a reason. It’s a matter of noticing those opportunities that pop up before you. So, I don’t think it’s luck as in total random chance, but more because you had the energy you may have created in your life. All you have to do is be aware.”

One of the main reasons Susun likes being her own boss is the freedom she has to be with her family. For her, family is top priority. Though she was raising three daughters on her own while she was creating the store, Susun doesn’t remember it being a stressful time. “I do remember that it was fun to have the shop downtown. The girls would come in; they loved being in town. If there was an emergency or something I needed to do for my kids, I’d put a ‘closed’ sign on the door and say ‘Gone for 15 minutes.’ ”

Now, two of Susun’s daughters work at Minikins. Susun has found out, as many people do, that it can be both hard and rewarding to work with family. “It’s hard to stay disciplined and clear about what needs to be done as employer and employee versus the roles of mother and daughter. It’s sometimes stressful, but I believe it’s a great gift to give my children to be there for them.”

Although Susun makes a little of everything, she employs from five to twenty contracted stitchers to do much of the sewing. The law is strict about contracted laborers. “The laborers cannot be working on the premises of the business, they must have their own equipment, and they must be free to work for other people. Just like a carpenter or electrician, the laborers are self-employed and pay their own self-employment taxes.”

Susun has developed long-term working relationships with many of her stitchers. When she needs more, she puts up a sign saying “Experienced Stitchers Wanted,” and every year plenty of women apply. She sends them home with a sample packet to test their level of skill. “We pay them by the piece; it can range from fifty cents to $10 or $12 per item.” In order to determine how much a stitcher should be paid per item, Susun practices to see how long it takes her: “I consider myself a fairly fast stitcher. I try to gauge it so that a stitcher, if she were fairly efficient, could earn somewhere around $10 an hour.” Susun tries to provide a minimum of $7 or $8 an hour.

The women with whom Susun contracts have a variety of reasons for wanting at-home work. “Some of the women have other jobs, some of them are involved with their kids, some of them just want a little bit of spending money, and some of them need work and need a pay check. The ones that need the money and work the hardest get most of the work.” As a single mom, Susun knows what it’s like to be raising kids and trying to make a living at the same time.

Though the Minikins store has become a feature of the downtown Farmington landscape, Susun continues to take her wares to craft fairs and trade shows. They make up almost half of her business income. She does about fifteen shows a year, with her younger home-schooled daughter, traveling all over New England from July through early December. “If we were located where there’s a lot of money, a lot of people, and a lot of traffic, we wouldn’t need to go anywhere, but this store doesn’t support the business well enough by itself. We have to go to the people; they’re not coming to us.”

Minikins was one of the first businesses in Farmington to have a website: www.minikins.com. The website generates only about 5% of Minikins’ business, but Susun likes to have it because people who have seen her products at shows can go online and browse through a catalog of what she offers: “If the item ordered is in stock, it will be shipped immediately; otherwise a stitcher will be called and the item will be custom made.”

Susun is not what one may think of as a typical business person; she’s not committed to having Minikins get bigger and bigger. “Sometimes I think that I should go from three
or four phone lines back down to one, get rid of the computer, have no Internet, have no special orders, no cell phone and simplify the business. I'm not there yet, but I think that I might do that someday,” she laughs. “I think that I may be going along with the norm too much, not listening to the voice of a simplified, more spiritual way of doing things.”

Even though Susun does not see herself as “typical,” she does consider herself a successful businesswoman. “Just the longevity of Minikins is a mark of success, and that I have been able to support myself for all this time. I’ve been here on Main Street for ten years now, and I think that it’s nice for the community to have that stability. I always like it when there’s a store that I know is going to be there next year and the year after, that I can count on; it just feels homey. Also, I feel that I have been successful in providing income and meaningful work for many local stitchers.”

Susun describes the success and growth of her business in terms of balance and flow. “I have learned and applied that principle about letting things flow. I didn’t need to plan way ahead how I wanted it to be. I just needed to be in the moment and do it with joy. It rolled on its own. Things would flow and it would grow and I would say, ‘This is working out really well; I can buy a little more fabric this year or I can make another product.’ Balancing is still hard but I think that we’ve done pretty well with learning to balance what’s really important in life with earning a living and supporting the family. I really like the idea of being available to my children and having the flexibility to do things that are important to me outside of work.”

Susun loves the work she’s doing. “One of the things I read somewhere, early on, about being in business, was ‘Don’t be emotionally involved in your product,’” she laughs, “and I would say just the opposite, ‘Be emotionally involved with your product! It’s fun!’ To me it’s a spiritual way of being, and your energy shows in what you do. If you don’t really have a feeling about your product, why is your customer going to have a feeling about it?”

Susun finds spiritual fulfillment in the intrinsic value of work itself. “I listen to my heart and do what I like to do. I think that’s the biggest message I would like people to get; you can make a living doing what you love to do. You can survive on very little. If you’re happy, you don’t feel like you need a lot of material things because you’re already doing what you want to do, whereas, if you’re working just to make money, you need to balance that with finding things you want to do in your life. When you’re doing the work you love, the happiness is already there.”

“Do what you love. Don’t try to do a business that doesn’t really attract you, and be wide open to different ways of manifesting what you love. There is a market for everything; if you’re doing it out of the love of your heart, then it’s probably something meant to be, something the world needs. Trust yourself and trust the universe to provide what you need. Everyone’s question at some point in life needs to be ‘What is my gift to bring to the world?’ At different times in our lives it’s a different thing. Just have faith in it and go with it.”
Registered Maine Guide Jane Barron has been manufacturing high quality canvas camping gear out of her home in Kingfield (pop. 1,169) under the name Alder Stream Canvas since 1990. She began by making her own gear. Today, when not making and marketing her products to others over the Internet and through trade shows, she guides them down Maine’s waterways.

Mountains. Driving north to Kingfield in February to interview Jane Barron, I’m struck by the mountains. I feel I’m miles away from anything. But I’m not. When downtown Kingfield comes into view, with its stores lining both sides of the road and people bustling down the sidewalks with parcels and coats pulled tight against the harsh February wind, I think of my hometown, Waterboro. I feel better now, knowing Jane and I have this environment in common. I pull into the driveway of her large white frame farmhouse. A woman with short dark hair answers the door; it is Jane. She welcomes me in. She shows me the living room where there are three large sewing machines against the wall. They’re bigger than any I’ve ever seen. In the basement, where Jane keeps her raw materials, there are shelves stacked with colorful canvas and leather. In the middle of the room is a huge table with patterns, sturdy pairs of scissors and half-cut materials. On an enclosed porch we check out some finished pieces. Jane’s company logo, a beaver under the name “Alder Stream Canvas,” appears on every pack and bag. Her business is strewn throughout her house. In her garage there are boxes everywhere. Jane wades right in and starts opening them up, pulling out everything from hiking and camping packs, to fanny packs, to bags for holding skis, to cases for hunting rifles, to thick blade sheathes for axes and little books to hold fly fishing hooks. Back inside, we head to the kitchen for the interview. It’s cluttered neatly. The table is cleared.
“My sewing started when I was a kid. I remember wanting a bathing suit and my mom said, ‘Well, if you want to make one (for yourself) you can.’ My mother didn’t know how to sew, but I’d run over to the neighbor when I had questions. My mother took me to sewing lessons when I was in high school, one night a week.

“For years I wanted to be a physical education teacher like my mother. But I liked a variety of things. When I started school I was a forestry major; I ended up in education so I could get my summers off. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to work outside some of the time.

“In my early twenties I made gear. I hiked the Appalachian Trail and I made stuff sacks and all kinds of things like that. When I canoed the Wind and Peel Rivers in the Yukon, I needed a waterproof pack and I made one. That was in 1987. I started sewing as a business around 1990 when I started making things for friends. It started very, very small.

“My products range in cost from two to three to one hundred and fifty dollars. I make a lot with leather straps, rivets and buckles. Typically a pack is sixty to eighty dollars, but most of my items are thirty and under. I ship things all over Maine; sometimes outside of it too, and I have some customers that order something every couple years. I had a big order once go to Japan. They ordered one item of everything. Actually, I think they were copying the stuff I made. I took the money. It was about five hundred dollars and I was thrilled. It was the biggest order I ever had.

“My business is probably twenty percent guiding and eighty percent sewing. I got my junior guide certificate when I was sixteen or seventeen, and all through my college years I worked at children’s camps. I got my guide’s license in 1990; I apprenticed to a couple of guides in Maine before getting it. I did trips in Labrador and in Maine on the Saint John River and the Allagash. I mostly do older folks or a family group. Once in a while I’ll do a teenage trip, but it’s rare. I get paid anywhere from seventy-five dollars to a hundred and twenty-five a day.

“My business just evolved. I tried to get teaching jobs and I just couldn’t get in. I didn’t get in, and didn’t get in. And then another year went by and I still kept sewing. Pretty soon it was, ‘Hey, I’m making it on my own!’ Somehow it’s still working. It’s been twelve or thirteen years now. Every year my sewing gets a little bigger. I can be a little bit pickier about which trips I take. I keep growing. But I sub in the elementary school once in a while, January through April. I might do one or two days a week. Subbing enables me to be part of the community.

“I like to balance the work and the play. In the winter I’m always going to a ski center and I know a lot of the people that work there. I can sew for two hours in the morning and then go skiing. That’s the good part, the flexible hours. It’s great. And it’s terrible at the same time. You really have to be disciplined.”

“Though it seemed to me that Jane must be a kind of wonder woman to have things work out so well for her. I learned things aren’t always easy. She isn’t a successful businesswoman because of coincidence or luck. She works through her problems, learning from them. She applies knowledge from her previous work to her business.

“I do worry every once in a while about my finances. I get stressed out a little bit because I don’t have a check that comes in every Thursday or whatever, but it manages to come in. I’m really good at budgeting. I try to be anyway. I buy my oil for the next winter in July when the price is low. I do Common Ground Fair in September. That’s the time of year my house taxes are due.

“I also have a website: http://alderstream.wcha.org. Sometimes something comes in there out of the blue. Last year I got a call while I was in bed. This guy called up and he ordered four hundred and fifty dollars worth of stuff over the phone, and I was half-asleep. I get quite a bit of business through the Internet and through the Wooden Canoe Heritage Association, too, because a friend from there built me my web site. The Association likes nice things to put in their guide books. That’s the time of year my house taxes are due. I buy my oil for the next winter in July when the price is low. I do Common Ground Fair in September. That’s the time of year my house taxes are due.

“Shelli’s Journal
I’m leaning toward Jane Barron or Wendy Newmeyer. I’m a little surprised, since while I love the outdoors, I’m not much of a physical person. Maybe I don’t give myself enough credit in the physical department or maybe I have a romantic view of being in the wilderness or living “off the land.” I don’t think I have to worry about it, though. For this project, I’ll just be talking about it. I can do that.

I feel somewhat foolish. I’ve given Jane a draft of the oral history. I was really excited with what I had as a theme, that Jane used her life interests and made them work for her as a business. But the first time I explained it, she didn’t understand and the second time she told me it wasn’t that at all. But she told me she didn’t mind it if I made it sound romantic. Which would be great, except the point of this project isn’t to write something that sounds nice, but to tell the true story of these women.
boats. That's a good little niche. You have to find the little niches. I also have to make pocketbooks and shoulder bags for the general public. I can't just make camping equipment. I have to have a variety to make it.

“I hemmed pants at an L.L. Bean factory for two seasons. They have industrial machines. I remember talking a lot to the maintenance guys about machines. It's a part of your education; it all helps some. I hemmed a hundred and fifty pairs a night. I was just cranking them out; I learned how to sew faster.”

Jane has learned a lot of business strategies over the years. She relies on the support of her family. She expands her business through a wide range of marketing, not just local contacts and the Internet. Fairs and shows are also good places to sell her products. She barter.

“My family's been real supportive of me. For example, I go to Common Ground Fair every year. My mother came last year. She's a really good salesman; I might as well just go home. She loves to talk to people. She's come with me two years now and she can outsell me three to one! Who can say no to a woman, seventy-seven, who says, 'My daughter made this! Isn't it nice? Don't you need one?' She loves it. We slept in the back of the truck. I don't need a fancy hotel room to please my mother.

“I do little barter trades as well. Yesterday I got my hair cut. I went over and the lady asked, 'Can you fix my son's jacket?' I had just written her a check for fifteen bucks for the haircut and I said, 'Do you want to just trade the haircut for the zipper?' She said 'sure,' so we traded.”

Jane feels very strongly about her business. Since she's built it from scratch, every facet of it reflects her. She doesn't measure its success by the money she makes, but rather by her reputation. She started from nothing and keeps it going. It allows her the freedom to enjoy her leisure time as well as her job.

“It's my business. I created all the patterns. I don't have anybody else's patterns and my work has its own style. My colors, my choice of fabric. It has its own personality. That's why this is my own business. I've just done it a little at a time. And it is a growing business. A few times I've taken a few risks and bought things, but most of the time I had the money before I did it. I have to do it that way. I'm not a loan person.

“I don't necessarily make a ton of money, but my business, guiding and sewing, allows me lots of flexibility. I consider that very important. For the last two summers I've taken off for five to six weeks on a long extended canoe trip with friends. I couldn't do that if I had another job. I can do that next week, if I've got my bills paid. That's what really makes it worthwhile.

“I'm an avid cross-country skier, and I like the mountains in this area. I'm fifteen miles from the cross-country ski center. I've got to live someplace where there's snow and it's cold. In the winter I can ski between ten and twelve or ten and two, and I can work in the morning from six to ten and work again in the evening. I can set my own time.

“Sometimes the weather's just too nice to stay inside. Other times, before a big show, no matter what it's like I'm working twelve hours a day for four or five weeks. I have to sew a lot, and I have to be disciplined. And yet, three weeks before, I had my time off for canoeing. That's what I consider success.

“I also measure success by the clients that I've guided that like me and come back and send me cards or give me tips. Or by the reputation of my products. People come up to me at some show and say, 'I bought this pack from you three years ago and it's gone across the country and I love it.'”

Jane may pay her bills ahead of time, but she lives in the present. The future is something she feels will come on its own. Will her business last forever? Maybe not, but that's okay. If it doesn't she'll find something else that works. That's the kind of person Jane is.

“I'm sure I won't be doing this forever, but as long as I'm happy doing it I'm going to keep doing it. I still have my teaching degree to fall back on. I can always go into that if I want to, or do something else. I don't want to be working forever, but I like what I'm doing now. Who knows? Ten years from now or three years from now I might say, 'I've just had enough. I can't sew another thing. I can't do it.' But I don't make future plans. I just take one day at a time.”
Katenia Keller established Flying Feet Dance Studio in 1983 shortly after moving to Solon (pop. 922) as a way to continue dancing. Trained in classical ballet and practicing modern dance, she serves as the choreographer for her local school district. She also works through the Maine Arts Commission as an Artist in Residence in public schools across the state. She performs regularly with her company, Flying Feet Dance Theater.

Arriving at the community center in Skowhegan where Katenia teaches, I wonder if I am the right person to be recording her story. I’ve never danced. I couldn’t tell the difference between fourth position and one hundred and seventeenth position. But I know I want to work with Katenia because I want to put a face on some of the policy research I did the year before. I had studied the numbers that demonstrated just how much investing in the arts was, arguably, the only way to lead to a competitive market in an increasingly global economy.

I want to work with Katenia, not only to tell her story as a woman who has made a business out of her art, but also as an artist who has made her business in the economically depressed, rural, western mountain region of Maine. Locating her dance studio at the end of a hallway, I peek in and see a healthy handful of six and seven-year-olds following the instruction of a petite woman with long, graying hair and black stretch pants. Between classes, I introduce myself and confirm plans to meet later over dinner in a nearby pub. Katenia, unlike most business owners, doesn’t have an office. She relies on rented space and schools throughout the state for her teaching and performances. In many ways, this travel reflects the nature of an artist’s success in a rural state.
In the Beginning, There Was Dance

“I studied dance at different studios in North Carolina. It’s something I’ve always loved; it came easily for me,” Katenia tells me during dinner. She takes her time speaking, with a slight southern drawl that, even with twenty-one years in Maine, is still audible. “I came out of a classical background and then, once I started to teach, I realized that I wanted it to be more creative, to pull out each person’s movement.”

At age twenty-six, Katenia married; two years later she found herself in Solon, Maine. “I wanted to live in the country on a big piece of land. I wanted to build my house. I was married. All of these things were really important to me, they were a priority.” While rural Maine had the quiet she was looking for, Katenia found it necessary to start teaching dance in order to experience a community of dance herself. “I realized there was nothing in this area for me to take, so, I created it. I started by giving a ballet class to adults in rented space in Solon.” Her first class consisted of two men and four women. “I really liked working with people my own age. As the years went by, I added children and rented studio space in the larger neighboring town of Skowhegan.”

Katenia’s business is really a series of outlets where she’s managed to hire out her talents and piece together an income. Her major outlet is in her school district. “I wrote a letter to School Administrative District 74 (SAD 74) seeking employment with the Maine Dance Institute, after seeing one of its performances.” The Institute had been brought to the district by Jacques d’Amboise of the New York City Ballet, who had started a similar program for inner city kids.

The timing was just right. SAD 74, committed to continuing the program when the rural satellite program ended, was looking for a choreographer. “It’s been twelve years now. I’m amazed that I can be hired as a choreographer in a rural area. I feel really lucky that I found d’Amboise’s program and I think they’re lucky that I happened to be there. It’s probably 50 percent boys grades four through eight. I love making a difference in boys’ lives, I feel like I’m helping bring better men to life.”

Another source of income is the Maine Arts Commission; she is a member of their Touring Artists Program. “I do residencies throughout the year, usually one a year, for whatever school calls me and for whatever time period. I’m with kids who have never danced before, probably never thought they would try to dance before and maybe don’t even want to be there. So when I go there, I just try to make it fun for them so they realize moving their bodies can be fun and there’s nothing to be embarrassed about or afraid of. When people start to move, ideas come out and it frees you up everything. That’s what I try to do when I go to these places where people have never danced before.”

Being an artist in Maine requires Katenia to travel. Wednesdays and Fridays are the days she works her Maine Arts Commission job. That leaves Thursday for her studio at the Skowhegan Community Center, the third outlet for her work. It’s where she works with children and adults. It’s where she recently began her adult class by drawing everyone into a circle and explaining that this year they would be “focusing on the four earth holy days: the spring and fall equinox and the winter and summer solstices.” To begin the transition from summer to fall, Katenia asked each person to come to the center of the circle and create movement to describe their summer. The rest of the circle moved with the center, silently.

Katenia’s dance company – Flying Feet Dance Theater – is the final piece of her business. It’s where she doesn’t get paid at all, unless she writes a successful grant application. In the late 90’s, she wrote her first application and received nothing. Since then she’s received three grants. “In life you have to ask for it; I just realized that in the past five years.”

Working-Class Artist

Katenia makes enough money to function as a working artist but not enough to carry health insurance. “I can’t worry about it. I can’t afford it and that’s it.” Instead, she relies on public health programs. This seems very much to work with Katenia’s philosophy of taking things in stride and living simply. “I have no other benefits. I don’t have a savings account. It’s pretty much a hand-to-mouth existence. I accept that because I feel it’s more important to love what you do
and just be happy in the present and not worry about ‘okay, when I’m seventy’ – I may not be seventy.” Still, even without the costs of a retirement fund and the safety net of a savings account, Katenia needs to manage her money like any small-business owner. Her biggest write-off on her tax form is her car.

Katenia’s letter-writing abilities have come into play while procuring studio space at the Skowhegan Community Center. “I wrote a letter and asked to pay ten dollars instead of fifteen dollars an hour because of my income. At first they said no and that first year I had to pay fifteen. Then, one of the directors found my letter and wrote me offering ten dollars out of the blue.” This has worked out well for both parties because Katenia’s a regular the Center can count on.

When Katenia began teaching, she charged too little and came up short with some of her bills. She’s become more business savvy since. “I like to make fifty dollars a class to cover me, the rental, and the prep time. The kids in my classes pay thirty-five dollars a month and it’s a nine-month commitment and I give [their parents] the option to pay the whole thing at once. The adults are paying ten dollars a class, but I can’t let them pay that way because I would be out of business in a minute. I ask them to commit for nine months. That’s budgeting.”

Even with all this focus on the income of her business, Katenia doesn’t see herself as a businesswoman. “I don’t really look at it as a business; it’s just how I support myself. It’s also how I fit into society. It’s what I do.” Katenia isn’t hesitant to view herself as successful, businesswoman or not. “I feel like what I have to give is valuable and important and that I’m affecting a lot of lives. In that way, I am successful.”

Future
Since her recent divorce, Katenia has been thinking of moving to the Belfast region on the coast for its stronger, more cultivated artistic community, its central location, and the opportunity of classes for herself. “One of the reasons I moved to Maine was to have that space around me. At the same time it limits what I can do; there are two sides to the coin.”

Katenia also has aspirations to perform more in the next few years. “At a certain age, I began to think ‘How much longer is my body going to be able to do the work of performance?’ If I’m going to perform, I need to do it now. I would love to focus on performing more than teaching, and return to teaching later, but all of my income comes from teaching.”

Katenia primarily depends on public funding – not on individual clients – to support her teaching. She feels confident that Maine people will continue to support her teaching. “I think that, as long as people realize the value of the arts, they’re going to try to support it. I have been doing it long enough that I have a reputation. People know my work and they know I’m responsible.” This reputation, in many ways, is Katenia’s security, in the absence of a savings account and retirement fund.

The authors of Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis speculate that as we – as oral historians – “shed our specific agendas, the women we interview will become freer to tell their own stories as fully, completely and honestly as they desire.” Looking at the focus and questions of the Telling Their Stories Project, I wonder how much they are going to take away from each woman’s story. While the project is not meant to be a how-to guide for starting a business in rural Maine, there are still elements of advice and process that need to be included in each oral history. Is that going to distort the image for our readers?

…

What’s been particularly beneficial this semester is the amount of revision, the push to get the exact tone, the conciseness, achieving a sense of Katenia through both her voice and my description of her teaching. I’ve struggled with this idea of me being a filter, because of course, the written word is not Katenia’s but my interpretation. It’s difficult to pull myself out of the piece because I feel as if the oral history has three layers: Katenia’s business and its evolution, Katenia’s life and spiritual/mental/physical self, and the relationship Katenia and I have built through the course of the interviews.
Carolann Ouellette is the owner of and head chef at Moose Point Tavern in Jackman (pop. 947) not far from the Canadian border. The tavern was built on the shores of Big Wood Lake in the late 1890s as the main lodge for Henderson’s Sporting Camps. Carolann bought the tavern in 1996 and transformed it into a rustic fine dining restaurant.

The northbound drive on Route 201 to Jackman winds along rivers and up mountains. It is about as close to nature as one can get from a paved road. The road itself is the only sign of civilization, besides the occasional sign for a rafting company. For a long stretch there is nothing but panoramic mountain views and an expanse of forest. The cluster of buildings that constitute downtown Jackman, a hundred fifty miles from the state capital and only sixteen from the Canadian border, appear suddenly. Moose Point Tavern is unlike any of the other restaurants in town. There is no Pepsi sign hung outside with rough block letters spelling out the name of the establishment. Instead, there is a beautiful century-old lodge on the shores of a breezy, blue lake. The owner and head chef, Carolann Ouellette, shakes my hand with vigor as I enter and leads me to a table by the window overlooking the lake. As she runs her hand through her long blond hair, I wonder how her fine dining restaurant has survived in Jackman.

Taking a Risk

Before she bought Moose Point Tavern in 1996, Carolann had held many jobs. She’d been a waitress, manager of a restaurant, a white water rafting guide, a flight attendant for Pan Am; she’d even worked at Bloomingdale’s in New York City. “I’ve done a lot of weird things,” says Carolann.

Ever since the New Jersey native had visited a local resort in the area with her family, she had felt a strong pull to the Jackman area. “I remember thinking, ‘This is it. When I grow up I’m going to own a log cabin in the woods.’” Eleven years ago this pull contributed to Carolann’s desire to buy Moose Point Tavern. “It had been vacant for a long time but the bank wouldn’t come down far enough in the price for me.” So she returned to the whitewater rafting company where she had been working. After two years there, “I had finally reached the point where I was management. I had a good salary; I had good benefits.”
But then, Carolann received a phone call from the woman who had paid the higher price. “She had been leasing it to a party who had just backed out of the lease and she didn’t want to run it again. She called probably two, three times. I said ‘no’ each time.” But the woman’s persistence won her over. “We put together a lease-purchase agreement and within thirteen months after signing the lease, I bought it from her.”

Overcoming Challenges
“The initial challenges were primarily staffing, getting the word out and getting to know all the vendors.” The business plan she had created earlier for the bank helped Carolann organize her thoughts. “I knew the type of food I wanted to serve. I knew the hours during which I wanted to serve. I had an idea of how I was going to market it, the type of people I was going to cater to.”

She also found that her previous and varied job experiences had taught her many valuable things. To her surprise, her boss at the whitewater rafting company became a role model. “There were many things I disagreed with him on, as far as being an employee and him being the owner. But what’s interesting is now that I’m in the owner’s shoes, I realize that a lot of what he did really was in the best interest of the business.”

Carolann also got advice from her grandparents who had owned their own business. But in the end she found it most helpful to look at material from her studies at Cornell, where she majored in hotel administration. Although she initially chose this program because “I had no idea what I was going to be” and thought “that will be an easy way to get through Cornell,” she found it to be an intense program. Carolann describes herself “falling back on a lot of what Cornell taught me.”

Surviving in Jackman
One of the most formidable challenges for Carolann was trying to run a fine dining restaurant in a remote, rural community. “I came into it with much loftier ideas than were going to work in the marketplace.” The menu proved to be too exotic for some patrons. “When I did my first menu we had things like a cold pork tenderloin salad with spiced apples and green beans.” Carolann certainly tried to stay away from the ‘ordinary.’ “I said I was never going to serve mashed potatoes and I was never going to serve Italian dress-
Despite the difficulties Carolann has faced in Jackman, there are many rewards. “Because it’s small and you know your local population you can give a little extra which is really nice. I have a small core of the local population that will eat here regularly. Someone will say ‘Margaret’s upstairs’ and you’re like ‘oh, well she’ll have fillet, rare, with sautéed mushrooms and gravy.’ Other than that it’s definitely known as the special occasion place.”

At the end of the (second) interview, Carolann kind of jokingly said “I’ve told you more than I’ve told my parents.” But she was also somewhat serious... I can see she is really letting me have a look at her and her business and she doesn’t seem to be holding anything back. I just hope I can accurately represent what she is telling me. …

At the beginning of the week, I received an e-mail full of comments from Carolann. I was a little concerned that some of her comments might be difficult to accommodate, but I felt that she did a great job of telling me what needed to be clarified, without trying to change what she said.

Independence
Carolann is not only the sole owner; she is also the head chef of Moose Point Tavern. In many ways, she feels that she is well-suited to being in charge. “I’m much better as a business owner than I am as a manager; I tend to be very independent.” Even when starting her business, she was adamant about being in charge. “I really wanted to do it on my own. Some people work really well with partners. But I think it would be tough for me.” But being independent is not always easy. “I do not delegate well. That’s a weakness of mine.” Carolann also realizes that no one can run a business entirely alone. “I should accept a little more help from those around me and not try to do everything myself.”

Luckily, Carolann always has someone who will listen to her ideas and occasionally offer advice: her mom, Barbara. “Having my mom here makes a difference because it is someone that I can sit with and talk with pretty easily. Usually. She looks at it very objectively and she’s been very helpful to me because I’m rarely upstairs in the dining room. So she helps monitor how the wait staff’s doing, where weaknesses are, what we need to look at. And she remembers the guests, their preferences for tables and drinks which all add that extra personal touch. She’ll kind of pull me back in line too if I’m doing something that maybe I shouldn’t or if I’ve missed something that’s really important.”

Carolann is also aware of the importance of her relationship with her staff. When they offer suggestions for improvements, she is willing to listen. “I’ll let them do a lot of it instead of saying ‘This is the way it goes.’” She also tries to be flexible when someone wants a day off for a special event. “I figure they’re all young; they’re in high school; they’re in college. There are other things they should be doing besides work, because they’re going to work the rest of their lives.”

Success
Carolann is considered successful by many people, from the members of the Maine Tourism Association, who elected her president, to the customers who approach Carolann to tell her that “we absolutely love this place,” to the lodge owners in Greenville who recommend Moose Point to their guests. To Carolann success means many things. “The fact that I’m still here is definitely a sign of success. Although I’m not necessarily that financially stable even after seven years. So I’m not sure that the money end of it necessarily determines my success. Being known around the state and even outside of it definitely means success to me. There’s a man that flies up with his wife from Buxton for dinner. That’s just amazing to me. It just is remarkable.”

Another important reflection of success to Carolann is her staff. “Most of my employees are high school and college kids. I’m able to give them employment and to teach them something. Watching them grow, watching them learn has been really fun. That’s success for me. Kids that grew up on hamburgers and macaroni and cheese now come in and have curry-glazed-maple pork medallions.”

The business has certainly been successful by Carolann’s definitions. Yet personal success, outside the context of her business, has been more elusive. “The business has done well, it’s going forward. As an individual I’m kind of stagnating.” Striking a balance between running a business and having a
personal life is one of the biggest challenges now facing Carolann. “What’s nice about owning my own business is I get to choose when I want to go and when I don’t.” This year, at the end of October, she got a last-minute invitation to raft the Colorado River. She was able to close the restaurant for a week to take advantage of the trip. “But at the same time if you really want the business to be successful you don’t leave it all that often.”

The Future

Carolann is certain that she wants to see the restaurant continue but sometimes wonders how long she wants to continue ownership. “My original plan was to run it for five years and sell it. I’m kind of surprised that I’m going into the eighth. Honestly, I haven’t aggressively thought about the future. I’m more in a day-to-day mode now than I probably was four or five years ago. I’d like to see it successful for years; whether I want to be involved in it every day for years to come, I’m not sure. If I sold this I’d probably do quite well and probably wouldn’t have to work for a little while and could relax. But I’d never get it back. I could never recreate this. That certainly would be a difficult decision.”

Even as she weighs the pros and cons of continuing Moose Point Tavern, Carolann also considers how the restaurant should expand and grow. “A constant goal is to continually grow, to the point where it’s reasonable,” Carolann says. However, it is hard to define what exactly ‘reasonable’ means. “I’m not sure I really want to grow that much more. I’m pretty happy with it as it stands now.”

Amanda Coffin

I have grown in a variety of ways. I have learned new skills. I have also gained a new appreciation of those who run businesses. Although my mom runs a business, I never quite realized how many challenges business owners face and how creatively they can overcome them.
Carole and Richard Duplessis are the owners of Pooh Corner Farm and Greenhouses in Mason Township (pop. 93). The business is located just west of the more populated town of Bethel. It consists of six greenhouses covering ten thousand square feet, one of which is operational year-round, along with the garden shop. The business is operated by Carole, her family, two year-round, full-time employees and two seasonal employees.

Pooh Corner Farm was tucked away at the end of a three-mile road, off a quiet stretch of highway. I turned down the road on a rainy day in late September. It soon turned to dirt, with thick forest on both sides. Strategically placed signs encouraged me to forge ahead. When the landscape opened up, I saw the farm in the distance. It stood against a backdrop of misty mountains and hills. A sea of mums in shades of red, orange and purple were laid out on a tarp beside the driveway, their brightness intensified against the grey day. A donkey was hiding in his little house by the driveway, watching me as I drove by as if to say “What brings you here on a day like this?”

A warm light was shining out of the windows of the garden store. I dashed through the rain, toward the porch decorated with Indian corn, hay bales, pumpkins and cornstalks. Inside, the store was warm and smelled of apples and spice. Carole’s smile was as warm as the space around us. She looked like a farmer with her “Pooh Farm” rain slicker, old jeans and green galoshes and shoulder length salt and pepper hair.

Together we looked around at the gardening clogs and gloves, growing equipment, spring bulbs, garden tools, and the selection of Winnie the Pooh merchandise. In the attached greenhouse, Carole showed me where customers can pick up flats of seedlings and perennials in the spring, and house plants and potted trees year round. We sat down at a table in the corner stacked with books full of floral arrangements for weddings. As we talked, Carole was pulling orange ribbon from a spool on the floor, making big bows to attach to decorative corn stalks. She apologized for the distraction; “I have to take these over to Fryeburg tonight; the Fryeburg Fair is this weekend and they need a delivery of corn stalks from me.” How far is Fryeburg, I wondered? How long has Carole already been working today?
Growing the Business

“I can change the oil in the tractor with the best of them. I’ve always wanted to do what I’m doing. I’ve always loved the outdoors, and I’ve had the idea, since I was a child, of homesteading. I grew up in North Carolina and was sent to finish high school in Western Massachusetts. A big part of the school was their outdoor program, which I fell in love with. The Appalachian Trail was right there.

“It was expected that the graduating class was going on to college. The University of Vermont is where I ended up. I don’t know exactly how agriculture came into play, except that I really like plants. I began studying plants, and it was all science. I can remember my professor saying, “Anybody can grow plants, go take your business courses.” In summers I went and worked in a greenhouse, and that hands-on work experience was really important.

“I finished school and then it was like, ‘Okay, I just graduated. What’s my marketable skill? Maybe I’ll go work for Outward Bound.’ I was thinking of something that wasn’t going to keep me in a cubicle. My father’s side of the family is very Maine. He grew up in Portland, so I came to visit some cousins here. I ended up getting a temporary job with the National Forest Service in Bethel. I met my husband, Richard, while I was living up at Sunday River; I’d already gotten this piece of land. I knew I had found my roots.

“Richard and I moved out here in 1984, and my oldest son, Forest, was born in 1985. The greenhouse business was started in 1986. The business is about Forest’s age, about seventeen years old. There was a very old decrepit house on the land that we lived in for five years. One of my goals in life had been to build my own house. I knew that somebody had to build the house and business, and if we hired it out we were going to be mortgaged the rest of our lives. So, together Richard and I built the place.

“We started out with one greenhouse and a little salesroom. I opened with a playpen in that little room. Forest, Christopher and Margaret were young. I really did have them underfoot, and I did a lot at nap time. The kids would get all sweaty because they’d be in their playpen in the greenhouse and I didn’t realize how hot it was. I would have liked to separate the two. I would have liked to get to sit down and say, ‘Wow, this is mommy time,’ instead of thinking, ‘Okay; I can water flowers and nurse.’

“At first we were seasonal; we pretty much closed by June. As the kids grew I realized that I couldn’t do jobs off the farm. If somebody wanted me to plant their garden, I would often go do that, but once I had to go do it with a baby in tow, it didn’t work anymore. And that was fine, because I had to set limits. I just said, ‘We aren’t a landscaper, but this is who is; if you’d like to use our plants that’s fine, but we can’t come and install them.’

“I thought to myself, ‘I’m small and I’m okay with that.’ I had to stay up all night because I had three young children to take care of. I didn’t want to add any more to my plate. But then at some point I realized one little greenhouse was going to net us x amount of money in one year, and it wasn’t going to make it. Having income that lasts from May until July was totally ludicrous. When your family grows and your expenses grow, you’ve got to be able to take care of that.

“The greenhouse business was doubling every year, and it became clear that we either needed to get bigger . . . or not. It was just a matter of gathering our customers, and keeping our customers, and romancing our customers. And they told two friends and so on. It was easy to expand in greenhouses because they’re not expensive; deciding to establish the flower business made us year-round.”

Life at Pooh Corner Farm

“Most people have a business and it yields them enough income that they can play, or enough time that they can play. I didn’t get that from this farm. Though, I do love the change of seasons. Every year there’s still that ‘Phew, the frost came. Thank God.’ I don’t want it to come and I don’t want it to come. But then it comes; it’s done. I like knowing
that there’s a light at the end of the tunnel, that there’s going
to be something different in the winter. In spring, I like the
experience of gearing up again.

“That pace is increasing every year. When it gets around
to May, I will start at five o’clock in the morning and I hon-
estly won’t end until eight, and then I might go back out
and do paperwork. I have to be here and on top of things
all of the time. I’m running six greenhouses, covering ten
thousand square feet during peak season. If the furnace fails in the
greenhouse and it’s cold I have about thirty minutes, so I have to
get right out of bed and be right there right away.

“There’s a 2,500 population in Bethel. That amount of people
to support the area is very tiny. Because my location is remote, I
have to do a lot of things to survive. I do a mailing a couple of
times a year just to say, “Here we are, here’s what we’re doing.” I’m
sending customers Christmas cards right now. They’re not go-
ing to get a Christmas card from Wal-Mart; they’re going to get
the flier in the newspaper.

“I always have someone behind the counter who can smile,
and that’s not necessarily me because I’ve been working too
hard. Laureen, who’s the floral designer, has been doing it since
high school. She adores her work, because I’ve been working too
difficult. She’s wonderful with the customers, and it shows. These days, she
brings her baby, Audra. I can put her in the front pack and go wa-
ter so Laureen can be at work; she can do what she needs to do
with two hands and wait on the customers. It works for all of us. I don’t want her job. I’d
rather walk around with her baby on my chest.

“All three of my kids are working with me, and I pay
them, of course. I expect them to do housework; that’s part
of being a family. But this is where we earn our living, and
they’re entitled to a paycheck when they come across the
driveway. My daughter, Margaret, is the most personable
kid you ever want to meet. She’s a super-qualified kid today
because she’s been a part of the questions and answers of the
business – ‘Should we carry this product?’ and ‘How do you
think we should display this?’ – And I listen.

“Richard and I have raised some happy, capable kids. If I
hadn’t had a business that took so much of my time I would
probably still be tying my seventeen-year-old’s shoes. Now
he’s really learned some life skills. The kids are independent,
but they still know they can always call me, because it’s not
like I’m working for someone else.”

Looking Ahead

“I’m still building the business. I feel I’m on a plateau because
I’m working around the clock, but there’s only so much one
can do. I don’t want to add so much that I can’t do it
well. I haven’t come up with a plan yet of how to step back
and change it. I feel a little bit too young to think that I will
be more of a manager and not hands-on. Right now I over-
see it all. I get up at five o’clock in the morning to make sure
the van’s loaded, it’s got its list, it’s got its invoice, it’s going
where it’s supposed to go, and then it’s coming back.

“Going home at five o’clock would be glorious. So it
just means letting somebody else take that control. I trust
people. It’s not mistrust, it’s just. . . . When I make a commit-
ment to people, I tell them they get to go home at five. I’m
not going to panic and say, ‘Oh, I’ve got to have you stay
until seven because I took too many orders.’ That just not
fair; there’s a life beyond here. I’ll smile at them and say, ‘I
created this. Goodbye.’ And I stay late.

“I’ve been at it fifteen, sixteen years in my front yard,
okay. I can’t just sell it. I have a commitment to its longev-
ity, but I also have three amazing kids with futures I have to
think about. Right now they’re helping me, but they’re go-
ing to be leaving me. Forest is looking, hopefully, at school
beyond high school, or at least moving on. I say I want to
keep them forever, but the reality is I probably won’t. It’s
nice to see what’s out there, make your choices. Where you
end up has got to do with the choices you make. I certainly
don’t want to dump the business on my kids — ‘Well, you
grew up in this, now you have to run it.’ I wish for them
something they want to do. I wish for them to see the world.
If they want to come back, fine. Farming here, it’s not solv-
ing world hunger, but it is living in a peaceful little valley.”
Nancy Marshall worked as Communications Director for Sugarloaf/USA before establishing her own public relations business, Nancy Marshall Communications, in her home in Carrabassett Valley (pop. 345). She started in 1991 with a handful of accounts and has grown considerably. Her big break came when she was awarded the multi-year contract for the Maine Office of Tourism.

Skiing, golfing, white-water rafting, Nancy Marshall does it all. As president of the largest public relations firm in Maine, Nancy’s life often resembles a triathlon. When she is not pitching story ideas to travel writers over dinner or leading a group of them on a press trip across the top golf courses in the state, you might find her out with her husband, Jay, and two sons, skiing Maine’s highest peak. In everything she does, Nancy actively combines business with pleasure, enjoying the career she has created for herself in Nancy Marshall Communications.

A Personality for PR

Nancy’s energy bubbled over as she enthusiastically shook my hand in the parking lot of her Augusta office. Our one telephone conversation had been brief and to the point. Nancy was all business and I admit to feeling a little intimidated prior to meeting her. I wasn’t uncomfortable for long though; Nancy’s warm smile put me at ease right away. Nancy was relaxed talking about herself and her business. Her outgoing personality was designed for public relations, and she sensed that early on.

“I decided while I was at Colby that public relations would be the best use of my skills. I started out at WCBB, Channel 10, tallying up the results from the election of the fall of 1982. That temporary part-time job quickly led to becoming the full-time public information manager for the station. I also met a young guy named Angus King, who had a TV show there,” she said laughing, “not knowing he was going to become governor. When he did, I did a lot of public relations projects with him and his wife Mary and that was a huge boost to my career.”

When she was starting out in public relations, Nancy did a lot of writing. She later realized that was not the best use of her talents. “I thought of myself as a writer in my early PR jobs, but as I was developing my own business I began to realize that it was easier to hire other people to do the writ-
ing and less easy to find people who could sell, generate new business, and then organize and manage the business."

The former member of a triathlon team is, not surprisingly, very competitive. "Once we lost a bid because we weren't perceived as being high tech enough. The agency we were going against had a fancier web site and had emphasized using e-mail; I had prescribed a basic program that used a lot of traditional PR methods. That prompted me to totally revamp our web site."

Challenges as Opportunities
Nancy's ability to see opportunity where others might have seen hardship is another of her strengths. After spending seven years as Communications Director at Sugarloaf/USA, a major ski resort in western Maine, she turned what was really a downsizing into an opportunity to launch her business. She chose the name Nancy Marshall Communications because, as she explained, "I saw myself as my biggest asset." By taking her off the payroll, and hiring her as a consultant, in 1991 Sugarloaf/USA became Nancy's first client, and Nancy Marshall Communications was born.

"I found out quickly that there were a lot of other businesses in the tourism industry that were eager to get at the contacts and the expertise that I had. I quickly had three very complementary clients: one skiing, one rafting and one wind jamming. That was all within the first year of having my own business, having my first child, and trying to finish up my masters degree at Thomas College. Slowing down wasn't part of my vocabulary!"

Nancy makes it her business to become intimately familiar with her clients' businesses. "When I started working with Northern Outdoors, I told them I would go through the guide training so I could understand their business better. When my son Craig was six-months-old, I spent seven days on the Kennebec River training to become a guide, flipping rafts and doing practice rescues."

Support
There was never any doubt Nancy would be both a career woman and have a family and she had the support of those around her, even if they didn't always understand why she felt she had to commit so much time to her business.

"My parents and my in-laws have always been very supportive as far as helping with the children, but there was a time when I felt like my mother didn't really understand what my business was all about. I don't think she felt that my business was worth all of the time and effort that I was putting into it, and that she had to put into it to, because I went on my first business trip when my first child was only three-weeks-old and I left him with her. Whether we can admit it or not, we all want our parents to approve of what we are doing, so it sort of hurt my feelings when at one point she said, 'Why don't you just have a normal job?' especially when I felt like what I was doing was so unique.

"The first time my mom actually got an appreciation for what my business was all about was when I rented a building in Kingfield and moved my business out of the print shop my husband, Jay, and I bought in 1993. When I moved my business into the office and got a big sign right on Route 27 with my business name on it, then it had some credibility for her. That same year I was invited to the Blaine House with then First Lady, Mary Herman, to talk about PR plans we were working on together and I asked my mom to join me. She sat through lunch and heard me bantering ideas back and forth with the Mary and afterwards she said, 'Wow! Now I can really see how your work is so uniquely suited to you!'"

Should I Grow?
Over the years Nancy has built her public relations agency from a one-person operation working out of her home in Carrabassett Valley to a staff of thirteen people working out of offices in Augusta and North Anson in three divisions: Nancy Marshall Communications, Maine Media Clipping Service and Carrabassett Marketing & Printing. When deciding whether or how she should grow her business Nancy has not been afraid to seek advice from her colleagues and mentors over the years.

"Throughout the '90's, I was working so hard, so much, and the year I turned forty, it was sort of like, 'I can't do this anymore.' I had to face a really tough decision, do I downsize significantly? I even considered downsizing the business."

Christine's Journal
I pull into the parking lot five minutes late and nervous. I don't know why I am nervous, I shouldn't be. This is my game. I know my stuff (at the time, Steele was a student and working as a stringer for a statewide newspaper). I came prepared. There is no set agenda. I know I can do this.

... If typing the transcript isn't bad enough, hearing how stupid I sound on tape is. Did I interrupt every question? If only I could keep my mouth shut it might be all right. Did either of us finish a single sentence?
to being just me again and being a consultant working out of my home. I either had to do that or I had to expand big. I consulted with Warren Cook, the former president of Sugarloaf, who had gone on to become the president of Jackson Labs in Bar Harbor. He’s always been somebody I have really trusted and sought advice from.”

At that time, her office was in Kingfield and it was Cook who helped her to come to what she describes as the “sad reality” that she couldn’t continue to grow her unique business from rural Franklin County. Her choices were to bring the business closer to where her clients were, or going very, very lean – operate out of her car.

Nancy said she didn’t like the idea of going really lean in part because she would have to give up her largest client, the Maine Office of Tourism in Augusta. She discussed the idea with one of her most trusted employees, Charlene Williams. “We just couldn’t imagine that. It would have been almost like a crime to just hand back, or quit that huge account. I sort of made an announcement to my staff; I actually had the staff vote. I said, ‘Look, we have to either downsize or we have to grow big’ and everyone said, ‘All right, we’re going to grow!’”

Future
While others move to the city, for Nancy, living in rural Franklin County and establishing an office in Augusta is the best of both worlds. “I never really thought I was going to stay in Maine because I’ve always enjoyed traveling a lot. I didn’t know if Maine was going to offer enough for me in terms of diversity and opportunity, but the career I have created for myself has allowed me to travel a lot and raise my children right in Carrabassett Valley, which is just a great place to raise a family.” Don’t say she’s slowing down, though. “I call it, adjusting my focus,” she says, laughing.

As her career progresses and grows, Nancy would like to broaden her client base to include more international clients and expand her consulting business, acting as a mentor to other public relation firms, teaching them how to market their gems to the rest of the world, as she has done for the state of Maine. No matter what she does, one thing is clear, Nancy will continue combining business with pleasure in everything she does.

Christine Steele

I feel Nancy is more relaxed. I know more about her business now so I can ask specific questions. She talks openly about her career and family. Very real but at the same time the sharpest business woman, or man, I have ever met and I have worked for million dollar brokers on Wall Street.

Oh, yes, it is a good thing I work well under pressure because the pressure is on. The story is coming to me. I have dreamt it. No, I’m not kidding. I wake up every morning with a new piece of it in my head and go to writing. The first morning the lead came to me, I was, like, “that’s it.” It seems to be flowing now, a few more ideas every morning.
Barbara Joseph is a holistic health practitioner and educator of Polarity Therapy and Reiki. Her private practice and approved proprietary school, Holistic Alternatives, in Waterville (pop. 16,371) encourages a conscious approach to health and well being. She works with others to integrate the use of such therapies as Reiki and massage into the medical model.

Barbara Joseph has a calming and inviting presence that could put anyone instantly at ease. Each time we have met she has welcomed me with a hug and a warm smile. Barbara radiates energy. Her passion for her work and life shines through in her actions, her words, and her art. I interviewed Barbara in her office, a space she has created to be supportive, and safe. The scent of incense lingers faintly in the air, and the soothing sounds of Mother Nature play softly in the background. Barbara’s photo art hangs from the walls, bursting with color and life. In one corner of the room there is a small area for conversing. In the middle is Barbara’s Polarity table, a large massage table where she does bodywork with her clients. On one wall, under a stunning photograph of an iris, is a crystal bowl that she plays by circling its outer rim with a covered mallet. The sound it produces is deep, full, intense – unexpected from such a delicate-looking bowl.

Barbara’s Business

“I began Holistic Alternatives in 1990 as a private practice that now includes a variety of alternative healing therapies, including Polarity Therapy. Each offers individuals an opportunity for increased self-awareness and optimal health and wellness. Polarity Therapy is an innovative health care system based on the balance and flow of vital energy. It is a unique system of energetic touch, full-hand contact, rocking, reflex and pressure points that relax the body and mind. Potential results are the alleviation of tension and pain.

“Nine years after starting my practice, I established Holistic Alternatives as a proprietary school licensed by the Maine Department of Education. I currently offer training
programs in Polarity Therapy, Reiki, and Integrated Energy Therapy. These programs promote personal enrichment and offer unique career opportunities. There is definitely a rise of interest in the holistic field, as people are experiencing many beneficial results.

“My teaching generates enough money to support me eight months out of the year; my client base supports me the rest of the year. I have a sliding fee scale. People can determine what feels comfortable for them within the scale. If I feel hesitancy, I will say, ‘I have accepted less and I have received more; please let me know what you are comfortable with.’ I also barter, for my haircuts, my taxes, other bodywork, getting my chimney swept, and my brochures before I started using the computer. I also need to honor that a cash flow is important because the phone company and the bank don’t barter with me.

“I am a facilitator. I have learned to be a compassionate yet neutral witness to what ever my clients’ stories are. My role is to reflect back to people so that they can get to their own knowing. I assist in opening doors so they can have a wider perspective on what is true, and encourage their voice and potential. When a person makes the initial call to set up an appointment I listen for whom they are; when we meet I observe how they walk and hold their bodies, what they say and how they say it. I don’t listen just for content, but also for expression, pitch and volume. They give such rich verbal and nonverbal information.”

**Barbara’s Journey**

“I was born and raised in Connecticut and went to the University of Connecticut for two and a half years. I was in liberal arts and thinking of majoring in special education or social work, which isn’t so far a cry from what I have developed, I left college, got involved with the counter-culture, and began to travel. I moved to Maine in 1970 in a homesteading frame of mind. I lived simply; I didn’t have electricity for fifteen years.

“When my son was quite young, I worked in a greenhouse raising bedding plants and houseplants. I loved working with plants, but I didn’t want to be in an environment where I was exposed to insecticides. I had been working for a few years in the greenhouse when a friend of mine decided to open a restaurant. I chose to work at the restaurant as a second prep chef. I worked nights and had friends who were willing to stay with my son at my home. Over the years I increased my hours and became a waitress, a bartender, and a soup and dessert maker. I learned how to interact with the public, which is a wonderful skill for becoming a practitioner.

“Originally I dabbled in alternative types of modalities for my own personal interest. I didn’t consider them as alternative therapies; they were simply things that I was attracted to. I was a single mom, and at the time my son was very young. In the evenings when he would be in bed, I would read books and do some of these activities like yoga and meditation. I also began to take workshops on these alternative therapies. It started to expand into a greater range of information about healing and awareness.

“In 1989, I had the opportunity to take a Polarity training workshop. My son was old enough to stay alone, and I went to Portland one weekend a month. Initially it didn’t have anything to do with a career change. It wasn’t until I was in the training that I realized how important this was to me and that I wanted to do it as my livelihood.”

**Making a Commitment**

“In 1990, I rented a space that was conveniently located right across the street from the restaurant. I could fit in clients before or after my restaurant job. My home is in Canaan (pop. 1,841), yet I chose Waterville both for its large community and market. My home is very beautiful and has a supportive atmosphere, yet I recognized that I need to have my home separate from my business.

“I continued with my advanced
training in Polarity and also started taking other trainings at certification levels. I began to make fliers and go out into the community. I taught the basic precepts of Polarity at adult education classes, as well as meditation and Tai Chi. These were great marketing tools to introduce concepts relating to my work and help to make them household words.

“Over time I knew that I wanted to make a career change because I loved what I was doing. I started to downscale my work at the restaurant, and when I felt brave and courageous enough I stopped working there. I put my attention into my practice and it began to grow. I started to trust that it would support me. I have been totally self-employed since 1993.

“I’m somebody that just jumps in and then learns how to do whatever needs to be done. I was very organic in my approach; I didn’t consider opening a practice or a school until I was in the process of doing it. It wasn’t about making “this much” money; it was only about doing what I was compelled, propelled, to do. I did set goals. I wrote them in my journal, I drew them, I sang them, and I danced them. I took the necessary steps to initiate them.”

Challenges

“When I first started my practice, I languaged it in very esoteric terms, using words like ‘soul,’ ‘alignment,’ ‘consciousness’ and ‘enlightenment.’ I eventually found that it was limiting. I had met a certain clientele, yet there was a point where my business dropped off. I found myself with no appointments. I had to look at my fear because this was now my source of income. I had to trust that I wasn’t supposed to be looking for another job; that thought made my heart sink. Polarity Therapy was what I was supposed to do.

“It was then that I realized how I was marketing myself. I realized that I was using language that was foreign to many in the community. I had to consider what that meant. I had to ask myself if I wanted to compromise and change my words. Then I realized that I wasn’t compromising at all, I was expanding to include more. I began to describe my work in terms of ‘stress,’ ‘stress reduction’ and ‘pain relief.’ I was becoming more inclusive and that helped my business to pick up again.”

Ebb and Flow/Balance

“In the beginning I had to learn to recognize that there is ebb and flow within a business, just like the elements. Business may be in a stagnant period, it might be barreling right along, or it might be in a gentle place. There were years that I struggled because I had interests in so many diverse areas and I felt like I should figure out that one ‘most important’ thing. Then my interests started rippling and overlapping. The richness of who I am comes from music, nature, art and dance; they are not separate from being a Polarity facilitator and educator.

“I love to dance. I have always loved to dance. I love to move, to be free, and to be expressive with my body. When I was a single mom I started exploring dance again after having put it aside over the years; I started to take workshops with a wonderful dancer who was doing African dance in Rockport. Photo art is another important aspect of my life. At one point I exhibited and sold some pieces. Then I realized that I missed the photos when they weren’t on the walls of my house and office. So I decided to have note cards and postcards made up to share my photos.”

Trust and Success

“Trusting one’s self is really key. Listen to that voice inside you. You don’t have to jump off cliffs and throw everything out. You can explore and make small changes. Success is being true to oneself and being willing to explore what that means. It is the ability to listen, and to not judge. It isn’t necessarily about how many clients I have, though sometimes it feels like that is the measure. The truth is, if I am successful in who I am and how I live, that will attract to me all that is necessary to support me.”

I got an e-mail and a card from Barbara. She said she loved the process of reflecting on her life and her journey. She said some of the questions I asked weren’t things she had really thought about and she is happy to get to spend some time with them.

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I just came out of the interview today with a stronger connection to what we are working on and to Barbara. It’s bigger than I thought it would be but in a very good way. I guess I wasn’t aware that it would affect me so personally. I keep thinking about how, when I read her bio, I knew I had to work with her.

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Corinne Leary is a licensed soil scientist and site evaluator in Monson (pop. 749). Her love of the out-of-doors eventually led her to establish a business mapping soils and designing septic systems for the new homes, roads, and developments being built throughout her adopted state.

Driving up to Monson, I was unconsciously envisioning a lumberjack-type woman: flannel shirt, jeans, work boots, ponytail or short hair. So I was surprised when I met her. She looked younger than her forty-nine years. She was thin with very long silky light brown hair and she wore a fitted black shirt with jeans and black boots. She also wore eye make up. But it was the hair that really got me, spilling down her back and sparkling in the afternoon sun. This was not my only surprise; she was full of them. Corinne is a mother of two sons; she is a teacher, a born-again Christian, a hunter and fisher, a wife, and a belly dancer!

What Exactly Does Corinne Do?

“There’s nothing about this job a woman could not do. Let’s say you’re going to buy a house. You’re going to call a site evaluator. So I’ll come down with my auger and my shovel and make sure that you can put in a septic system on that piece of land. I stake out the system and you receive a drawn plan. You take it to your contractor; the contractor installs it and you can flush your toilet.

“As a soil scientist, you get into a bigger can of worms. When you are working on a development, it can be huge. The engineer wants to know what kind of soil is there for placing the roads. He’s not going to want to place it over ledge or have ledge pop up in the middle of it. So he wants a soil map. Is it sandy? Is it silty? Is it clay? What kind of foundations can we put in it? Is there a drainage problem? So those are the two hats I wear. Keeps me pretty busy.”

Where Does She Work?

Corinne lives in Monson, a small, unimposing town once
known for its slate industry. But she doesn't work there. The Appalachian Trial (AT) crosses Route 15 a few miles north of Monson at “The Ledges” and Monson is the last town northbound hikers encounter before going into the One-Hundred Mile Wilderness. Some Monson residents make a living off these AT hikers with restaurants and bed & breakfasts, but there are not very many employment opportunities.

Corinne works all over Maine, so she doesn't depend on Monson's economy. Also, because Corinne's business has been so successful, she has the flexibility to decide where she will work and how far she will drive. “I go as far as Ellsworth and Farmington. I don't like to go south of Waterville; there are more headaches down south. My biggest expense is my car. I blast 40,000 plus miles a year.”

Falling in Love with the Soil
Corinne carried her childhood love of the outdoors with her to the University of Maine at Orono. “I was taking a lot of geology classes and cultural and historical classes and it all went together towards a major in archeology. Then Dad said, ‘You need to do something where you can make a living and it wouldn't be on free digs.’” Corinne took her father's advice, began taking soil classes and soon “fell in love with the dirt.” She graduated with a degree in natural resource management.

This eventually did lead to something where Corinne could make a living. Corinne's field is very dependable both because of constant stream of new developments in Maine and, as Corinne jokes, “Because everyone is always going to have to flush their toilets.” Corinne married in college and had children after she graduated. “I put my career on hold for seven years. No daycare.”

Once her two sons were in school full-time, Corinne decided to get licensed as a soil scientist and site evaluator. But it wasn't that simple. “I was seven years behind everybody.” She took a field course designed specifically for people that were taking the licensing exams. It was taught by Kenneth Stratton. “If I had taken the test right after I'd gotten out of college, I never would have met Ken. He was a very good teacher.” He was to become her mentor after she became licensed and established her business.

Balancing Ideals and Reality
Corinne has been extremely busy in recent years because of new developments and the influx of people building houses, especially vacation homes. She has been doing a lot of subdivisions, which can sometimes be a conflict for her. “It pains me that people subdivide but you're not going to avoid subdividing land. It's going to happen. I would like to see at least two-acre lots. When they start chopping it up into little one-acre lots; it's just sad. After 9/11, I told my husband, 'You watch; people are going to get out of the cities.' Maine has been growing ever since.” Along with trying to convince people to make their subdivision lots larger, Corrine has been doing a lot of subdivisions, which can sometimes be a conflict for her. “It pains me that people subdivide but you're not going to avoid subdividing land. It's going to happen. I would like to see at least two-acre lots. When they start chopping it up into little one-acre lots; it's just sad. After 9/11, I told my husband, 'You watch; people are going to get out of the cities.' Maine has been growing ever since.”

Being a Woman in a Male-Dominated Field
Corinne is one of a few women soil scientists in Maine, but this is changing. She has even mentored one woman in starting her own business. There are more women in the field now than when Corinne first started her business seventeen years ago. “I think women feel like they can do this now. Girls that like the outdoors, that think they can operate outside the traditional women's jobs are getting into the field. I like to see them come in. It's not so much a boy's club anymore. If you hire a woman you're getting a better job because she has to do a better job to survive the competition.”

Growth, Success, and God
No one has any reason to wonder about Corinne's work. She
sometimes has to hand extra work off to fellow site evaluators, because she simply doesn’t have the time. Corinne started small, grew rapidly, and has deliberately reduced her workload in recent years. She tries to give herself the weekends off and limit herself to three soil tests a day. Corinne credits her success in this business to doing quality work.

“Success is when somebody hires you and you go out and do the job and a month or a year later, somebody calls and says, ‘So-and-so said you did a really good job for them. Would you do mine?’ And when it gets like that you don’t have to advertise. I’m successful because I try to do quality work.” However, Corinne doesn’t credit herself solely for her success. “I can be proud of what I’ve accomplished, but I don’t think it’s all been me. Living almost fifty years teaches you a lot. Your faith teaches you a lot. Other people teach you. Experience teaches you. Mistakes teach you. All of life teaches you, so you can’t stand up and say that you’re the cause of your success.”

As a born-again Christian, religion is important in both Corinne’s personal and business life. She has learned that “God is close, right in your life! He is alive.” As a result, she says, “When it comes to finances, I leave it in His hands. I pay tithes and figure He sends me the jobs to pay for them. And it’s incredible. Last year; I bought land with the faith that the jobs would be provided to pay for it. And they were. That’s the way I get by.”

Marriage

Corinne divorced her first husband. She married again after she started her business. Corinne met her current husband, Joe, when he hired her to do septic designs. “He’s an installer. He builds roads and installs septic systems and digs foundations. He’s a contractor. I’d done jobs for him and he was interested in most everything that I was interested in as far as outdoor activities. I like to hunt. He likes to hunt. I like to fish. He likes to fish.”

Related as their two careers are, Corinne and Joe don’t work with, or for, each other. “I can’t say to a client, ‘Here’s my husband’s card.’ If I do that I have to pass with it four or five other cards from other contractors, because otherwise it would be a conflict of interest. Contractors wouldn’t hire me if I was giving out Joe’s card to everyone I did work for. That’s not ethical.”

Mentoring Others

Early in her career, Corinne brought another woman into the site-evaluating field. The woman had lost her job where they were both working. I said, “Don’t worry; you’ve got a biology degree. Come with me for a year; then go take your test. You can make your own living. Work for yourself.” Corinne is also mentoring her son, Steven, who attends the University of Maine at Orono. At first neither of her sons was interested in entering her field but when Steven took some soil classes he became semi-interested. When Corinne told him how much money she earned in an hour, he became very interested. As a woman in a male-dominated field, Corinne is putting a spin on the tradition of handing down the family business. She is a mother passing this traditionally male business on to not one but both her sons.

Corinne is also a mentor in another area. She teaches and performs Middle Eastern dancing as a member of the Aminah Desert Dancers Troupe. Corinne originally started dancing purely for exercise and absolutely fell in love with it. “It was a very good soul-searching, woman’s dance. I’m in a man’s world twenty-four hours a day and a lot of things I like to do, like hunting and fishing, are men’s things. So I really enjoy the dancing. No men allowed in there. It’s just a bunch of women getting together and having a really good time. You let your hair down. There are things a woman can do that no man can do!”

Regarding the reading – The People and the Land: A History – There’s a lot of talk about change and in the second interview Corinne and I talked a lot about how Maine is changing. She’s observed that people have been moving into the rural places of Maine a lot more in recent years. Corinne actually predicted this was going to happen after 9/11 happened and she did indeed get a lot of work.

… From getting lost to losing an entire interview to static, I struggled to capture Corinne’s story. Leaving the security of the classroom to drive to unknown regions of Maine was very intimidating for me. Interviewing a stranger and writing about a person much older and more mature than I were fears that woke me in the night. However, conquering these fears has left me feeling more confident about myself and about facing the unknown.
Donna Hathaway is a Certified Public Accountant, who has been building her business incrementally since 1982 in the town of Dover-Foxcroft (pop. 4,602). Her degree in math, fascination with puzzles, and the need to support her family landed her in the field of public accounting.

Donna Hathaway is the only Certified Public Accountant in all of Piscataquis County (pop. 17,000). In a traditional male-dominated field, nothing about Donna is traditional. She drives a burgundy-colored Mercedes in Dover-Foxcroft, at the southern edge of the north woods. She is a grandmother who does not bake cookies. I arrived early – just in case I got lost – after almost three hours of driving. It gave me time to look around the town. Donna’s office is located in a house built in the 1800’s. Various awards decorate the walls of her waiting room including a YMCA award for Donna’s “dedicated leadership and devotion to others.” Her office is in a room with a great view of the trees lining the street in front of her office. On the back wall many photographs of her family hang above a bookshelf. I was instantly drawn to her kind but businesslike voice and youthful face. Her desk was immaculately tidy.

Donna Hathaway

With a Passion for Puzzles

BY SARAH RUSIN-DICKENS

Donna Hathaway is the only Certified Public Accountant in all of Piscataquis County (pop. 17,000). In a traditional male-dominated field, nothing about Donna is traditional. She drives a burgundy-colored Mercedes in Dover-Foxcroft, at the southern edge of the north woods. She is a grandmother who does not bake cookies. I arrived early – just in case I got lost – after almost three hours of driving. It gave me time to look around the town. Donna’s office is located in a house built in the 1800’s. Various awards decorate the walls of her waiting room including a YMCA award for Donna’s “dedicated leadership and devotion to others.” Her office is in a room with a great view of the trees lining the street in front of her office. On the back wall many photographs of her family hang above a bookshelf. I was instantly drawn to her kind but businesslike voice and youthful face. Her desk was immaculately tidy.

The Search

Donna has always had a passion for puzzles, so it was not surprising that she graduated from college with a degree in mathematics. However, she did not believe she could use this degree outside of teaching, an occupation that did not hold her interest. Once her two daughters were in school she began searching for a satisfying career to replace her job working for her husband. “I got married half-way through college to an attorney that worked here in town. I worked with him all through college and while my kids were growing up. At some point, I guess I got a little bit frustrated with all the things that I had worked on going out of the office with his signature on it.”

Donna also realized that because she was much younger than her husband, she would need to be able to provide for her family on her own one day. “I was searching when I took a bunch of classes through the local adult education program and finally hit one on accounting and I loved it.

“I had done bookkeeping when I was in high school with the head bookkeeper at Dover-Foxcroft Academy. But when I went through school, accounting wasn’t considered a
profession; it was just a job and if you had a reasonably good brain they encouraged you to go to college. I thought this (accounting) wouldn’t be bad; I could make a living doing this.”

Getting Started
Donna already knew that accounting was something that she could excel in and decided to pursue it at Husson College. “I took one course at a time until I got to the point I thought I could pass the CPA exam.” She started in 1981 and got her license in 1988.

Going back to school while she was raising her two daughters and her two step sons wasn’t the easiest thing to do. However, Donna feels she managed her time well. “I don’t have any real regrets. I think the timing was good. My kids were at a point where they wanted more independence. My having something else to focus on let them be more independent; it forced them! I think it is important for parents to teach their daughters be independent, to teach them that you have to be comfortable and happy with yourself and not depend on someone else to give you that.”

Luckily for Donna, money wasn’t the main reason for starting her own business. “I was fortunate that I had a husband who made a good living so I didn’t have to support the family.” But her husband died shortly after she started her business. “At that point I already had my license and my business was established. The business probably saved my sanity in some respects. I had a job I had to get up and go to every morning, instead of staying home and pulling the covers over my head.”

In addition to support from her husband, Donna had other help in the beginning: an accountant in nearby Guilford. “He was looking for someone to take over his client base because he wanted to retire. I thought that would be a good way to start. We came up with a deal: I paid him a percentage of the gross every year for so many years based on the number of his original clients that I kept. It was doable. I am the one CPA in the county, which is a hoot! There are a lot of CPA’s in Bangor that will come up and do finance, but I am the only one who has a practice here and it feeds my ego a little bit.”

Balancing and Doing What She Likes Best
Donna likes to keep her home and work life separate. Her office is about a half-mile from her home. But it wasn’t always that way. “I have a little home office, and I found myself spending time doing nothing else. I set it up one year during tax season. After supper I would work until 10:30 or 11p.m. Eventually, I said to myself ‘This is ridiculous.’ ”

“My husband was adamant about keeping the office separate from the house because in a small town people know where you live, and if your office is right there, it is easy to approach you after office hours. They think, ‘Well it’s only going to take a minute and it’s just a quick question.’ Then they don’t think that you should bill them for that time because you were at home. Probably the office now is a little bigger than I need, but I already own the whole building. There is an apartment upstairs that I rent out. The size allows all the employees to spread out and have a space of their own.”

Donna’s preference for tax work derives from her passion for all kinds of puzzles. “I always liked to do puzzles, word puzzles, and crosswords. I look at income taxes as puzzles – putting them together in the best possible fit, giving your customer the best deal, and still complying with the law. Auditing tends to be more tedious.” Donna also does accounting for small, community non-profit corporations. “There aren’t very many people who understand the taxation of non-profit organizations. I also do a lot of payrolls; they keep a steady income all year long.”

Community
For some, Dover-Foxcroft is not a good place to live because it lacks economic opportunity. Donna has tried very hard to change that. She wants it to be a place for her granddaughters to come back to. “I like the idea that if they wanted to live...
here they could find a job that would give them the standard of living they wanted. Not having to live from paycheck to paycheck. Being able to put a little money aside for a rainy day. I tell people that we shouldn’t set our sights too low; we shouldn’t just be trying to create blue-collar jobs. We should be trying to create the kinds of jobs that make kids want to come back from wherever it is they go to school.

Donna made it clear that although she could earn more money in the city, she is not concerned with earning more money, or increasing business. While she advertises, it is only to support her community. “I usually take out congratulatory ads in the yearbook here in town. In the past they have had promotions for blood drives and were looking for sponsors. I usually buy signs at the YMCA golf course for the golf tournament every year. I tend to sponsor things that I believe in.”

Donna’s volunteer efforts to help the community aided her through the time after her husband’s death. “Maybe I wouldn’t have gotten enmeshed in volunteerism in town, if he were alive. Managing projects that I thought were important to the success of the community seemed to fulfill something in me more than going out and socializing.”

Success

Donna drives her burgundy Mercedes around a small town and does not think about how society views her. People ask her if this is her second childhood. “Heck no! This is my first, and frankly I can afford it now more than I could then. And enjoy it more...If it ever ceases to be fun I’ll probably sell it.”

Donna has found her “niche” in life, which allows her to do what she wants when she wants. “I can go home at night and say that I have done a good job at bringing up my kids because they are wonderful human beings. I can say that I have done a good job at serving my clients. I can say that I have done a good job at helping my community. I have done a good job becoming the kind of person that I would respect in somebody else, in being the kind of person that people want to be around and do things with, and I guess I try to walk the Christian walk that I think the Lord wants us to.”

Future

Donna’s business has reached its peak, and she is aware that if it gets bigger the quality of her business might falter. “I have reached a point that I don’t know if I want to work a whole lot harder than I already am. If I get much bigger I am not sure that I can do justice to the clients that I have without bringing in someone to help. If I could slow down and interest a younger CPA to take over then I would be more than happy to expand the business.”

Like everyone, she thinks about retirement. “I could continue to travel, obviously. I love to travel. I would probably continue my involvement in the community. If I could see a way to work part-time and just slow down that would probably be the way I would go. I think you need to keep mentally and physically active to stay healthy. I think being active keeps you young. I think hanging out with my kids and some of their friends is helping to keep me young. Everyone says it’s no fun to get old so I have decided that I am not going to. Age is a state of mind.”
Wendy Newmeyer is the president of Maine Balsam Fir Products in West Paris (pop. 1,514). In partnership with her husband, Jack, she purchases waste balsam from local loggers, dries it and contracts with local women, many of whom work out of their homes, to manufacture balsam-filled pillows, draft stoppers, and sleep aids for gift stores across the country. She also sells the balsam wholesale to other companies. Wendy was named “Maine Small Business Person of the Year” in 2000 by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

When I called Wendy to schedule our first interview, she said many articles had been written about her business and she would send them to me. The packet of papers I received was permeated with the scent of balsam. The photographs of her in the clippings showed a woman with long straight blond hair, a bright smile, blue eyes and glasses. Arriving at Wendy’s after a two-hour drive through overwhelming green, I didn’t see anything factory-like, just a barn on my left and Wendy’s house at the far end of the driveway. Wendy’s barn is her factory.

It was raining lightly when I got out of my car to walk to the barn. Through the screen door I saw the same long-haired blond I had seen in the photographs. She was bustling around boxes and pillows when she invited me in and suggested we start first with a tour. She told me to brace myself before we entered the room where she dries the balsam tips. Wooden drying trays were stacked to the ceiling. I could barely breathe; the aroma was so strong and it was hot. After that, we went through the finishing room where two women were filling pillows. As we sat down in her tiny office, which was filled with all the necessities: four phone lines, a fax machine and a computer, she said, “I hope you don’t mind not a lot of eye contact because I need to look at what I’m doing.” I didn’t. She cut fabric for the pillows almost to the very end of the interview.
Scraps from the Forest

Wendy and Jack shared a dream of living off the land. Influenced by Helen and Scott Nearing in their book, Living the Good Life, the New Jersey couple visited twelve different states before deciding on the land in West Paris.

"With the nest egg we saved, the land was bought and a small, run-down trailer was put on the property. We knew the type of lifestyle we wanted to live and prepared to live off the land. We really didn't have a clear vision of how we would earn our living, but we had some ideas. I thought it would either involve farming, gardening, herbs and crafts for me. Jack thought he would have a saw mill and build buildings and our own home until he could figure out what else he could do. We quickly realized people like ourselves with large pieces of land were not making their living from their farms.

"It was the Balsam fir trees on our land that held the most promise. In 1980, we decided to invest in an old bulldozer that Jack used to haul out the trees he had cut from our woods to sell to the pulp mills in the area. That same year, our neighbors told us about an incense factory in Lewiston that bought balsam tips to make incense and souvenir balsam pillows. I called the company and told them that we were interested in supplying them with balsam tips. They said, ‘Well that’s great, thank you very much. We’ll call you when we need a new supplier, or you can call us once a month.’ I called them once a month for an entire year before they needed a new supplier and that was my introduction to the whole world of Balsam fir."

After selling the balsam tips to the incense factory, Wendy came to the realization she wasn’t going to be successful selling the product raw since the scent was only requested seasonally; she had to find another way to market it year-round.

"I was looking at the incense factory pillows, knowing that another company bought the pillows to rip them up for the balsam tips, thinking ‘Gee, why isn’t someone making a nicer pillow?’ I started asking gift shop owners that, because it seemed like such a natural thing for a gift shop from Maine to have. They said, ‘Well, there’s only one company that makes them and they don’t really have any great design or pizzazz. We don’t like to carry the same merchandising that every little souvenir shop down on Route One has.’ I realized then that this (making better pillows) was a really good idea and an open market.

“The first year my business started, I was pretty much doing everything except for cutting the balsam from the trees, which Jack did, and creating the moose and loon designs for the pillows, which local artists did. I chopped the branch tips through a shredder, put it in a self-invented drying process, cut, printed and stuffed the fabric cases with balsam tips and sewed them into pillows. I figured we needed to gross about forty thousand dollars by selling ten thousand pillows at an average of four dollars a piece. I had read that ten million tourists came to the state every year and figured I had to convince one person out of every thousand to buy one of my products to make the equation work and sure enough it did.”

The Road Less Traveled

Wendy sees herself as a non-traditional, self-taught learner.

“I was educated through the school of hard knocks, life experience, trial and error, and what I could learn from other people. I was more self-taught than anything else. I entered college when I was twenty-three as a freshman at Rutgers University. We had bought our land but we were still in New Jersey. I thought a good course of study for me would be plant and animal science since I was planning to live the life of a farmer. I had been away from school for too long though and had no patience for the program.

“College was a brief experience. I tried it; it didn’t work. But it underscored that it was okay for me to be a non-traditional learner. It gave me permission to start investing in my own education and pursue the things that most interested me. For example, I wanted to sew. I had always sewn but I wanted to do sewing at a different level. So I didn’t just buy some used inexpensive sewing machine, I bought a machine that was expensive and did more than my skills could handle. I grew into it.”
“I will do all thy desire concerning … timber of fir.”

—1 Kings 5:8

Wendy sees “divine intervention” in “chance happenings.” She believes that her business would not be as successful had she not been listening to God.

“I was subscribing to a magazine called The Herb Quarterly. It was an expensive magazine. In the fall of 1983, things were not going well financially and we couldn’t re-subscribe. I threw away what I thought was a renewal, but before I got the trash to the dump, it was as if this envelope in the garbage can was talking to me. I know it sounds strange, but it was saying, ‘Please open me,’ so I did.

“It wasn’t a subscription renewal, but rather a solicitation from the publisher of the magazine. If her readers wanted to make their own balsam pillows the deal was you could buy the balsam from her for ten dollars a pound. Now, I was selling the balsam to the incense factory at seven cents a pound, so it didn’t take me too long to realize there might be an opportunity between seven cents and ten dollars a pound.

“The publisher bought five hundred pounds of balsam without even a sample, just on faith. On that day, Maine Balsam Fir was born. Things just don’t really happen like that unless you have a blessing on you. Whenever I needed a door to open, I met the right person. I had to pay attention though and follow through. A lot of times people have great ideas or great opportunities but they just aren’t ready.”

Up Rooting and Branching Out

Fourteen years after she and Jack established the business, Wendy enrolled in an eleven-week FastTrac course to brush up on some basic business skills while figuring out how to cut back on her sixteen-hour-days at Maine Balsam Fir Products and avoid burnout.

“There came a time when we weren’t doing the things we really loved. It was just about keeping the business propped up and people employed. There were a myriad of adjustments and changes that we made as a result of the FastTrac course. I was not computerized and that was huge. Just getting simple information out of my records was extremely tedious, time consuming and inefficient. Up until that point I was very resistant to the whole idea of computerization. I really was. I had missed that whole thing. I was a little too old when I was in school. I wasn’t quite there yet.

“At this the twentieth anniversary of our business, I see myself, continuing to manage the business, be the creative force behind the new ideas and make sure everything can run smoothly. I am also branching out with my sewing. I love to sew. It’s just the craziest thing, but I just can’t get enough of it. I love cutting fabric; I love touching fabric; I love buying fabric; so I’m starting a clothing company of comfortable unisex clothing called Comfies.

“I’m also starting to build a gift shop that will allow me to sell factory seconds of my pillows, first quality clothing of Comfies and other things that I may wish to create like quilts, wall hangings, tote bags and aprons. Then we’ll take the money that we earn through that gift shop and start yet another nest egg. Once it’s built up we’ll build the factory of our dreams which has already been designed out on our highway frontage and then move the manufacturing business over there, get it running smoothly, and put it up for sale. I’ll retain the comfortable clothing as a means for me to still express my creativity just because I know I’m going to need to do that. I would not be able to live the life of a retiree just doing nothing. I just know that of myself.”

I feel that in this interview I got to know Wendy more. I thought we dug deeper and the interview seemed a lot more conversational. In the first interview, I must have been like a deer in headlights trying to take all of the information in.

I had just let her talk and I did little directing. But this time I felt comfortable enough to stop her (it might have been easier because we were more face to face than last time) and ask her to backtrack a little or explain things I didn’t understand.

I really have a much clearer idea of Wendy’s story.

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Sylvia Black runs Down Home Bed and Breakfast in Milo (pop. 2,543). She started the business as a way to fulfill her need to take care of people and to meet the needs of a community and a region at the edge of the north woods, a region with a growing dependency on tourism. Her growing business has kept pace with her involvement in the economic development of the region.

Down Home Bed and Breakfast is beautiful in the overcast light of early fall. The front porch of this simple, green house reminds me of a stately coastal home, but the Atlantic Ocean lies nearly a hundred miles away. The house and grounds overlook the Sebec River. I turn up my coat collar, give a quick knock on the front door, and step back as it is promptly opened. Sylvia Black’s voice is as rich as I remember from our conversation over the telephone. Her short, white hair is brushed back, allowing me a glimpse of butterfly earrings. She’s wearing softly colored clothing in spring yellows and blues. Sylvia beckons me into her home, smiling broadly and offers me a tour of the house. We climb the staircase. I walk a few steps behind her, breathing deeply, taking in the smells of wood, wallpaper, and lemon that are characteristic of old homes. Each guest room is marked by a small slate with the room’s name painted in script: Three Rivers, Summer Gardens, Bygone Days, Memories, Trains, and Trail’s End. Nostalgia, community, and culture are evident through each doorway. The sky is beginning to darken and it looks as though rain might arrive soon. Sylvia closes the windows with accustomed speed and we move downstairs, into the heart of the house. The dining room and kitchen are busy with preparations for two guests arriving this evening. Sylvia’s daughter, Julie, putters about the kitchen, while Sylvia and I move to the dining room table and begin the interview.
An Ideal Innkeeper

Sylvia Black has lived in Milo for all of her fifty plus years. She attended the town high school, worked in local businesses, married and was a stay-at-home mom while raising her two daughters. She opened Down Home Bed and Breakfast in 1989 after realizing that there was a need for such a place in the community and that it would fulfill her passion for providing hospitality to others. She is now rewarded by meeting people from all over the world.

“I wanted to provide a place for people to stay because there was no place in Milo. When I started the business, my husband had a full-time job. For the first ten years, he worked fifty hours a week as a supervisor at the Dexter Shoe factory. If we were empty for three weeks, it didn’t matter. We were living there anyway. The idea of it being a business that actually brought in enough money to support us didn’t start all at once. It was much later that I really started thinking about it as a business, instead of just a hobby.

“I enjoy providing hospitality. It’s like playing house if it wasn’t so much work. It’s a strong instinct I’ve had since I was a child. ‘Take care of people. Eat, eat, eat!’ I love to putter in the kitchen and hear people laughing and talking. We have guests from all over the United States. A lot of people like to travel in the fall and even though they don’t make reservations ahead of time, they’ll just ring the doorbell. We’re always ready. We’ve had guests from many European countries. Sometimes people in the community stay here just for a treat. It’s like a mini-vacation.”

Finding Room to Breathe

Sylvia spent her first ten years of business in an old farmhouse, with two guest rooms. She and her husband, Gary, had given up their bedroom and personal space to make room for more guests. But they found that it was still important to have breathing room. With the desire for expansion came the discovery of Down Home’s current location, a lovely two story home just a half-mile from the farmhouse.

“Somebody wrote an article about us, years ago; he said that there was no way that a bed and breakfast could survive if the owners didn’t have their own area, and I thought, ‘Oh, how silly. We’re supposed to mingle.’ But, to survive, when it gets busier, you have to have some of your own space. That way, the guests don’t feel like they’re walking into your space, and you have your own quarters, to be able to get away. That’s where the new location came in.

“We set the opening date for the Fourth of July weekend because it was a big alumni weekend here in town. We moved on Sunday and on the following Sunday, we had a house of fourteen people coming in. The day they were supposed to check in, there were rugs to be laid, there were shower curtains to be hung and a door to be put on one of the bedrooms. My elderly aunt was here with her two daughters. They were upstairs hanging curtains. My elderly mother was downstairs ironing the curtains and my father was holding them for her so they wouldn’t be dragging on the floor. Those were the two hardest days ever.”

Half an Employee: Who are We Financing?

The challenge in financing a small business is that you need a bank to finance improvements and grow the business. And you have to prove that you’re viable before banks will consider giving you a loan. The difficulty of financing is a stumbling block for many businesses, and it takes strength, persistence, and a little luck to find the right support.

“You get to a point where you have to finance even if you don’t want to because you have to find some way to grow. We were at that point when we bought the house. I had to shop a long time to find a bank that would look at my income tax records thoroughly enough to realize that it was a good investment. Most of them just said, ‘Nope, not enough income.’ We’re a micro business; we’re not a small business. A lot of times, when you go to these organizations, they’re calling a small business a million dollars a year or under forty employees. Well, I have half of an employee. For a while this summer, I had three halves of an employee.

“There’s a wonderful lady named Linda Gilbert at United Kingfield Bank who was willing to call my accountant and ask him about my tax records. We were very thrilled with the answers he gave. They backed up what I had already told her about how my business was growing, and I had to keep growing. She was willing to give us the help that we needed.”

Aileen’s Journal

I had an accident last night. I hit a deer in Mercer. This has put me a bit off schedule on my rough draft but I’m very happy with what I have pieced together thus far. It amazes me how easily Sylvia’s words can be strung together to tell her story. It’s like she knows just exactly what she wants to say, but it takes her a while to get there. It’s my job to go back there and make connections, to put it on paper.
Making Connections

Community is important in Sylvia’s life and to her business. In the town of Milo, it helps to bridge gaps, to work together and, by doing so, ensure the survival and health of the entire area.

“There aren’t enough businesses here to be competitive. We need to work together for the benefit of all. Piscataquis County only has a population of 17,000 people, and it’s as big as Connecticut and Rhode Island put together. We’re mostly wilderness because Piscataquis County includes Baxter State Park, the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, and the last hundred miles of the Appalachian Trail.

“Word of mouth is important here, including the awareness of local people in the stores and gas stations. They say, ‘Oh yeah, I know a place where you can stay.’ The town office sent us somebody two weeks ago. So did the library. At one point, I was told that there was no place to stay in the area so I started making a list and contacting each place where people could stay. I found that, on any given night, we could lodge two hundred people within a ten to twelve-mile radius. Now, if people call me and I’m full, I can send them to somebody else.”

Sylvia has joined several organizations to further her relationship with the business community in Piscataquis County, including the Cultural Heritage Eco-tourism Committee (CHEt). Sylvia has been the chair of CHEt for the past year.

“CHEt is a really hard concept for people to get. I have to start by saying that the traditional concept of economic development is, ‘Let’s bring in a factory to employ people.’ We say, ‘There are already all kinds of micro businesses here.’ They might just employ themselves, but they give themselves a job, and they shouldn’t be ignored. CHEt says ‘If we’re healthy and we grow and we’re well on the inside, then we will attract other things.’ Being involved in these groups makes me enthusiastic. They help me to think about the area at large, not just me or not just my business, but how we all interconnect.”

Business Expansion: Merging Comfort and Flavor

In the past two years, Sylvia has spent more time expanding the dining aspect of her business. It has won the interest of community members and created a unique niche in the bed and breakfast business.

“Until we moved to this location, we were only licensed for lodging, so the meals we prepared were breakfast meals for guests. Now we can prepare meals for the community. Last year we had a chef come in and prepare a special, five-course, French cuisine meal. It was very successful. We did it once a month and limited it to twelve people because the kitchen facilities were too small. Once we get our new kitchen in order, we should be able to provide sit-down meals for twenty-four people. I really want to do that through the winter months. That gives the locals something to look forward to, something different. I’ll probably have a chef do that, but if people just want to come in to have a dinner, a three course dinner, I’ll do that.”

Unlimited Prospects

As I prepared to leave Down Home, I took a quick peek at Sylvia’s guest book. My eye caught a small comment, near the bottom of the page – “Home At Last.” There I was having come full circle from home to business and back home again. That connection is always present, bringing necessary warmth to the B&B and satisfying Sylvia’s desire to care for others. In that respect, her success has come naturally. It’s not about elbowing for room. It’s co-existing, community, and finding a niche.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about strength and stamina lately. Sometimes when it looks like it’s impossible, you just keep on going and it all kind of clears out. I think we Mainers come from a hardy stock of people. People told us that we were crazy to buy this house. If they didn’t say it, they thought it, and they told us much later that they thought we were, but now they see.”
Newcomers and Natives…

Almost three quarters of the women interviewed for the project came to the region, as we say in Maine, “from away.” Some had summered here; some were part of the back to the land movement; some came to attend college and stayed after graduation. More than half were college graduates. More than half were married or in long-term relationships. Seven had children, three were divorced, and one was a widow. As a group, they have owned their businesses for a total of almost 200 years, or an average of fifteen years, with a low of eight years and a high of twenty-one years.

The loss of population in rural areas of Maine has long been a source of concern, with a focus on strategies for encouraging Maine’s young people to stay in the state. Yet, seven of the business owners were drawn to Maine because of the natural beauty and quality of life it offered, while three others came to Maine for college and stayed. It’s not surprising, then, that seven of these ten women “from away” started businesses that relate to the state’s natural resource and tourist industries.

Two of the four Mainers left the state after college, but they returned after not too many years. The other two established businesses in their hometowns and are actively involved in advancing the economic development of their region.

Following Their Passion…

Commuting great distances or becoming an entrepreneur of necessity are often seen as the only ways for an individual to support herself in a rural area. For these women, their businesses were not just a way to earn a decent living; they were vehicles for following their passions and creating the lives they wanted to live in Maine.

Like many entrepreneurs, the business owners were motivated to start businesses in areas where they had long-term interests, education, training and experience. For some, like Nina Gianquinto, of UpFront and Pleasant Gourmet, it was the combination of a lifelong love affair with food and people and experience working in a restaurant that helped her recognize that a love for food could be directed to fill an unmet need in the community. The result was a store that carried foods not found in the local health food store or the supermarket: gourmet chocolates, wines, coffees, olives, cheeses and breads. Similarly, a personal quest for health, healing and awareness brought Barbara Joseph of Holistic Alternatives to the realization that the healing arts could become her livelihood.

For Corinne Leary, it was her passion for the out-of-doors that lead to her education in natural resource management with a minor in soils and ultimately to a soil testing and site

Telling What We Heard

This project was intended to make visible the women and the stories behind the statistics rather than to add to the statistical analysis. Nonetheless, it was not possible to read the stories with all the richness of their diversity without trying to find the common themes, to understand what could be learned from their experiences and to think about the broader implications of these stories.

These women and their small, niche businesses in rural Western Maine contribute to Maine’s economy as well as to the vitality of the small towns and townships where they reside. In a state with a declining agricultural and manufacturing base, where many feel compelled to leave in search of better paying jobs, the stories of their accomplishments are worthy of careful reflection. In this section, we offer a way to look at their contributions without drawing conclusions, but in the hopes of stimulating further discussion. We may even change the way that we think about entrepreneurship and how we measure success.
evaluation business. Today, seventeen years later, she maps soils and designs septic systems for new developments and vacation homes. Not unlike Corrine, North Carolina native Carole Duplessis brought her passion for the outdoors, a degree in plant science from the University of Vermont, and hands-on greenhouse experience to Pooh Corner Farm and Greenhouses. Finally, it was Sylvia Black’s love of playing house and her ability to see the unmet need in her hometown that prompted her to start Down Home Bed and Breakfast.

**Recognizing and Seizing Opportunities…**

_Not all of the businesses were “passion-driven.” Some resulted from opportunities seized. “I believe that things happen for a reason. It’s a matter of noticing those opportunities that pop up before you. All you have to do is be aware in order to take advantage of them,” Minikins’ Susun Terese told us._

Entrepreneurs are frequently characterized by their ability to see and capitalize on opportunities that others miss. Susun Terese built Minikins from her need for a balaclava to protect her daughter’s face in sub-zero weather when she indulged in her passion for running while pulling her daughter on a sled behind her. Not only did she see the need for the product, but she also saw the opportunity to move into the market with an improved design at a better price for the customer. From that first hat, she went on to manufacture all manner of warm clothing.

The loss of a job in communications became the opportunity for Nancy Marshall to start her own public relations firm. She established an office in her home and seeing herself as her “own best asset,” she named her new business Nancy Marshall Communications and secured her former employer as her first client.

The acquisition of a small but expensive tractor that they had bought for their own use led Karen King and Lisa Burns to their landscaping and shoreline restoration business. The availability of the tractor prompted others to ask if they could pull a couple of stumps. From there, the story of the two women with a tractor sold itself and Cabins to Castles was born.

Flying Feet Dance Studio was a way for North Carolina native Katenia Keller to create a community of classical dance in rural Maine. She started by giving ballet classes in rented space in Solon and was well positioned to respond when her local school district was looking for a choreographer to carry on a dance program that had been started by Jacques d’Amboïse of the New York City Ballet. She was in the right place at the right time.

Inspired by the back-to-the-land-writings of Helen and Scott Nearing, Wendy Newmeyer and her husband, Jack, were drawn to a remote piece of land in West Paris. They quickly realized that their trees held the most promise. Initially, Jack cut and sold fir trees to the nearby paper mills, while Wendy chopped and dried the needles and sold them to a nearby incense factory for souvenir pillows. When Wendy realized that she could make a better balsam pillow, Maine Balsam Fir Products was born.

**Developing Unique Strategies and Drawing on Unconventional Resources…**

_The women drew upon a myriad of strategies and resources in the early days of their businesses. Many took their time severing ties to income-producing “day” jobs. Some started not_
one but two businesses, using the income from one to support the other. One woman relied on “public” patrons of the arts. Last but not least, several included bartering in their strategic tool kit. All of this added up to a reliance on multiple sources of income.

Like many other women business owners, these women often started their businesses on a small scale and grew them slowly as they built their capacity. They often relied on other sources of income to support themselves and their businesses. For example, Nina Gianquinto waitressed and tended bar for the first two years. Eventually, she bought three buildings in Farmington and created her other business: Front Street Rentals. The rental income mitigates the risk of operating her specialty food shop. Even now, she frequently caters receptions to generate revenue.

Jane Barron also has two businesses. One draws on her passion for the outdoors; the other on her ability to sew. Together, they keep her busy most of the year. In winter, she produces everything from backpacks to canoe paddle covers to cases for hunting rifles and sheathes for axes under the name Alder Stream Canvas. In summer, she leads canoe trips down Maine’s waterways as a Registered Maine Guide. During slow seasons, she substitutes in the local elementary school.

Barbara Joseph uses a sliding scale and accepts what her clients can afford to pay for her therapy. She also engages in barter, trading for haircuts, taxes, other body work, and services such as chimney sweeping. She readily acknowledges, however, the importance of a cash flow in order to pay her phone and other bills.

In the tradition of artists throughout history, Katenia Keller has public patrons to support her efforts to bring dance to her economically depressed rural community. Thanks to her local school district and the Maine Arts Commission’s Touring Artist Program, she works as a choreographer in schools throughout the state. When not teaching others to dance, she successfully applies for grants from places like the Maine Community Foundation to support performances of her dance company.

Preparing and Polishing…

While money was a necessary ingredient in establishing their businesses, the women spoke more often of the knowledge and skills they acquired in college and in their previous jobs and enterprises. They also spoke of the course work they took to obtain their licenses or the workshops they enrolled in to develop and polish their skills.

In many instances, the skills required for a particular business were acquired and refined over time. Not surprisingly, there were many ways to develop the necessary skills and experiences. Donna Hathaway went back to school to become a certified public accountant, taking one course at a time, while raising her children and working for her husband. After seven years of preparation, she was ready when a retiring accountant asked if she would take over his client base.

Hemming one hundred and fifty pairs of pants per night at L.L. Bean taught Jane Barron to use and maintain an industrial sewing machine, skills that she now uses in running Alder Stream Canvas. After becoming a Registered Maine Guide, however, she apprenticed herself to veteran guides before leading her own trips.

Nancy Marshall learned to write press releases and create
press packets as the public information manager for Maine Public Broadcasting in Lewiston. That job soon led to a seven-year stint in communications at Sugarloaf/USA in Carrabassett Valley, where her fluency in French helped her market the ski resort to Canadians. Not taking anything for granted, she enrolled in an MBA program at Thomas College the same year she started Nancy Marshall Communications.

Before establishing Cabins to Castles, Lisa Burns had taken courses in accounting, and Karen King had taken a smattering of college courses in architectural design and drafting. But Karen’s practical, hands-on experience came from working on a three man-crew building houses in Maine. Her contacts in the excavation business were helpful when she and Lisa began to market their landscaping and shoreline erosion control business.

Seven years after graduating from the University of Maine with a degree in natural resource management, with her two sons in school, Corinne Leary decided to become a licensed site evaluator and soil scientist. To prepare for her test, she took a field course from the former director of Maine’s Forest Service, Ken Stratton who became her mentor. Today she holds one of the 300 coveted licenses in the state.

Carolann Ouellette brought her degree in hotel management from Cornell University and a broad range of work experience in the hospitality industry to her venture with the Moose Point Tavern. Her anxiety was tempered by her background and preparation.

When Susun Terese established Minikins, her children’s clothing business, she drew heavily on her previous business experience contracting with home-based stitchers in California to produce crocheted cotton flowers to attach to hair combs. The California experience also included an accounting course and ten years of selling wholesale.

But the learning didn’t stop with the start-up of the businesses.

After their businesses were established, Wendy Newmeyer, Lisa Burns, Karen King, and Sylvia Black enrolled in Fast-Trac, an intensive multi-week program designed to produce a business plan. It enabled these entrepreneurs to build a stronger business foundation and to test what they had already learned from first-hand experience. Similarly, eight years after starting her bed and breakfast, Sylvia Black decided she wanted to grow her business and followed up her FastTrac experience by enrolling in another workshop for fledgling businesses. Two years after taking the Incubator without Walls program, Sylvia moved her business to larger quarters.

Nine years after starting her business, Nancy Marshall joined a network of advertising and public relations agencies that met every six months in Chicago. The message was that while you should be able make your agency anything you want it to be, it should serve your life instead of you serving it. The experience was a contributing factor that led to relocating her office and putting someone else in charge of the day-to-day operations.

Making Intentional Choices and Taking Calculated Risks…

How do you grow a business in a remote, sparsely settled region? Among other things, you make fiscally conservative but intentional choices and take calculated risks. Eight of the businesses were started at home. Five of them are still home-based: Jane Barron sews canvas camping gear in her living room; Sylvia Black lives in her bed and breakfast; Karen King and Lisa Burn run their landscaping business from their home; Wendy Newmeyer’s business is based in her barn; and Carole Duplessis’s farm is her business.

Many women business owners follow the same path that Susun Terese chose in growing their businesses. She worked out of her home for about five years and sold her products at craft fairs before moving to an affordable location on a side street. By the time she moved to Main Street, she knew she could afford the $750 the prime location demanded. She also had a fallback position. She could always move her business back to her home or close the store a few days a week and keep her part-time job in a local school.

Not only was Nina Gianquinto cautiously calculating when she purchased the buildings that provide her with rental income, but she was also cautious in purchasing her inventory, paying for it with wages from waitressing and tending bar. She sought suppliers that sold in small quantities, allowing her to diversify and avoid large inventories that have no market. To keep her modest inventory looking robust, she has deliberately kept her shop “intimate.”

Carole Duplessis started Pooh Corner Farm and Greenhouses with one greenhouse and a little salesroom. However, she soon realized that one small greenhouse selling seedlings wasn’t going to do it. Over time, she expanded to six greenhouses, built a garden store selling everything from garden books to garden tools and established a year-round cut-flower and house plant business.
Donna Hathaway chose to specialize in tax work early on, building on her personal preferences and interests. She also realized that concentrating on a specialty would enable her to provide the best service to her clients.

To prove to herself that manufacturing balsam pillows was a viable business, Wendy Newmeyer set a goal of making forty thousand dollars the first year. She calculated that she needed ten thousand pillows at an average sale of four dollars and that less than one percent of Maine's ten million tourists would have to buy her pillows for the equation to work. Working twenty hours a day, she produced a thousand pillows a week, and the sales followed.

Valuing Relationships…

Whether it is with their communities, their customers, their employees or the special people in their lives; whether it is working together for the betterment of their community, asking for advice, being influenced by others, or even gaining approval, the value of relationships is a strong thread in all these women’s stories. The relationships, with children, parents, parents’ parents, and community members, are multi-generational. Sometimes they are spiritual. They have been essential to the businesses’ survival and success.

The research on women’s entrepreneurship suggests that the value that women place on relationships extends into their business lives and that they see business as a network of relationships. The stories told by the business owners showed the ways in which this played itself out. For Nina Gianquinto, it was important to avoid stepping on other people’s toes, to complement the existing downtown and to bring diversity to it. She selects her tenants for her buildings carefully, so they work well together. She also cooperates with the health food store down the street by referring customers on a daily basis.

Soon after opening her bed and breakfast, Sylvia Black joined a number of organizations to strengthen her ties with the business community and is currently a member of the Cultural Heritage Ecotourism Committee and the Piscataquis County Economic Development Council. Being involved in these groups makes her enthusiastic and helps her think about the area at a large, not just her own business. She appreciates the fact that the businesses in Milo need to work together for the benefit of all. It is also important for Wendy Newmeyer to give back to the business community, by sharing what she learned in growing Maine Balsam Fir Products. Not only has she become an instructor for the FastTrac workshop for established business owners, she also works closely with other organizations that assist women aspiring to start their own businesses. Donna Hathaway works hard to create the kinds of jobs that will enable her grandchildren able to come back to Maine and have the standard of living they want. One way she does this is by teaching accounting skills to fledgling businesses enrolled in an Incubator Without Walls program in her region.

Relationships with family and friends are also important to these business owners. Lisa Burns and Karen King are best friends and partners in their ten-year-old environmental solutions business. By their own assessment, Lisa serves as the left brain of the company, organizing the office, writing out the bills and doing all of the administrative work, while Karen serves as the right brain, preferring to dig in the dirt with the crew. Being best friends and business partners means they can rely on each other through times of uncertainty, providing a support system many business owners don’t have.

Carole Duplessis employs all three of her children. She appreciates the value that they bring to the business from their involvement and their interest. Similarly, Carolann Ouellette’s mother plays an important role as a hostess at Ouellette’s restaurant. Gregarious and outgoing, her presence frees Carolann to concentrate on what she does best which is to be in the kitchen. While having some one to bounce ideas off of is welcome, Ouellette says it’s not always easy taking advice from your mother.

Jane Barron’s mother also helps with her business. She often goes along to craft fairs, turning her love of people into sales of her daughter’s canvas products. Barron appreciates her mother’s enthusiasm and adaptability, e.g., her willingness to sleep in the back of the truck and cook coffee on the tail gate in the morning.

Although Nancy Marshall’s mother always helped with her children, she didn’t always understand the business. It wasn’t until Marshall was six years into her business with her own office and a large sign on Route 27 in Kingfield that she felt her business was credible in her mother’s eyes.

Overcoming Challenges…

How do you access markets in a distant, sparsely populated location? You create something unique or in short supply:

“I’m amazed that I can be hired as a choreographer in a rural area.”

KATENIA KELLER, FLYING FEET DANCE STUDIO
“Literally there is not another place around for miles. We’re just unique enough a product because of the type of menu that we have and our level of service.”

CAROLANN OUELLETTE, MOOSE POINT TAVERN

“When you hear about something that’s sort of odd, word travels fast and it sticks in people’s heads. Women and tractors weren’t something that went in the same sentence together.”

KAREN KING, CABINS TO CASTLES

“Everyone is going to have to flush their toilets.”

CORINNE LEARY, SOIL SCIENTIST AND SITE EVALUATOR

Then you develop a website, create glossy brochures and attend trade shows. You also rely on word-of-mouth and networking. Six or forty-six percent of the businesses have websites. But if you are selling to a small number of widely dispersed customers, you may have no alternative but to make your car your office and drive thousands of miles each year across the state.

Marketing is always one of the biggest challenges facing any business owner and these women are no exception. Located in sparsely populated rural areas, they can’t rely on customers finding them. Instead, they have to find ways to get to their customers. Susun Terese acknowledges that her store location isn’t close to enough people, money or traffic to support the business by itself. So, she takes her business to the people via her website and trade shows. Although her website directly generates only about five percent of Minikins’ business, it is enables people who have seen her products at trade shows to go on-line and browse her catalogue. From July through early December, she travels throughout New England with her home-schooled daughter to the craft fairs and trade shows that account for about half her business.

Because her isolated location precludes having an easily accessible retail store, Wendy Newmeyer uses numerous other ways to reach her market. She has carried suitcases filled with her balsam fir pillows from store to store throughout Maine, flown thousands of miles to trade shows, and invested in a website. Her best marketing tools are a full-color catalogue and a toll-free phone line that connects to customers around the country. She satisfies her craving for face-to-face contact with customers by attending the Northern New England Products Trade Show.

When Barbara Joseph started marketing her holistic health practice, she described the services she offered in very esoteric terms, using words like “alignment” and “consciousness.” While it attracted a certain clientele, it was also limiting, so limiting, in fact, that business dropped off considerably. She realized that she needed to describe her work in terms of ‘stress reduction’ and ‘pain relief.’ ” Her business quickly picked up.

Carole Duplessis not only advertises her greenhouse business under the name Pooh Corner, she stocks her garden store with all manner of Pooh products and has a live pet pig (Piglet), wallaby (Roo), and donkey (Eeyore) on the grounds to attract customers to her remote location in Mason Township.

Instead of spending money on advertising, Carolann Ouellette spends time making contacts to attract potential customers to her remote lakeside restaurant. She has joined organizations all over the state, from the Moosehead Lake Region Chamber of Commerce to the board of the Maine Tourism Association. She also relies on former colleagues in the rafting businesses to spread the word, inviting them to bring their clients to her restaurant.

Nina Gianquinto has little trouble attracting customers to her purple-roofed gourmet food store on a side street in Farmington. Her biggest challenge has been finding distributors of the diversified inventory that her reputation is built on. Companies are reluctant to ship unless she can meet their minimum. At times she has bypassed distributors and gone directly to producers to see if they will ship directly to her; at times she has rendezvoused with truckers in parking lots in the southern, more populated part of the state. She’ll go to any length to get what she needs for her customers.

Corinne Leary puts about forty thousand miles a year on her car traveling the region to flag wetlands, map soil and design septic systems. Leary is selective as to how far she will drive, focusing on the central part of the state, working for clients (developers) she already knows. She’ll not go further for individual home sites, unless she can do four or five sites in one day.

Because of the locations of the businesses, finding and retaining employees is also a challenge. More than half of the women have people working for them. They range from full-time staff to part-time paid family members. Two of the women contract with home workers, a common practice in rural areas, providing work for women who care for family members. Like many entrepreneurs, it’s not easy for these women to “let go” and delegate, freeing them to grow the business. When they do
hire, they are often torn between the need to build relationships and the need to set boundaries.

Finding and keeping good employees is a challenge for any business owner. But because they value relationships so highly and care about the quality of the work environment, women business owners sometimes find managing employees and setting boundaries particularly challenging. Carole Duplessis raised three children while growing her greenhouse business, so it is not surprising that her floral designer now brings her baby to work. For Duplessis, this is a long-term investment in a valuable employee and together they make the arrangement work. But not every employee is as committed or demonstrates such a strong work ethic. Although Duplessis never thought she would need an employee manual, dealing with a lackadaisical employee compelled her to write one. Now she has something to refer to as the standard for their work.

Lisa Burns and Karen King say it takes a special kind of employee in the male-dominated field of earth moving to shrug off skepticism and work for two women. While Lisa and Karen demand a lot of their crew, they also provide a lot—and not just health insurance. Their employees can count on them for help with a crisis, time off when they need it, or a loan. However, communicating with the crew can be a struggle. When conflicts arise, Karen will step in and force them to talk. Although they may not like it, she believes that they better for it and, as a result, are able to work a little better.

Sylvia Black is learning that she can’t do it all: provide hospitality and handle the business details of her B&B. She is learning to delegate, although keeping part-time employees is difficult. Circumstances often change and the women she hires often find themselves their family’s sole breadwinner and in need of full-time work, something she cannot provide or afford. Sylvia has resolved the problem for the moment by hiring her daughter, part time.

Carolann Ouellette’s wait staff are mostly high school and college students. They are her sales staff and the first point of contact with customers. She tries to be flexible when someone wants a day off for a special event, but sometimes she wonders if she is too easy. Finding a balance is not easy.

To set the pay for her home-based stitchers, Susun Terese times how long it takes her to sew each and every item. From that she estimates what it would take for an efficient stitcher to earn ten dollars an hour. Testing the stitchers’ skills at the outset is the hardest part of hiring, because she can’t always give them the work they want. Trying to meet the needs of her stitchers may not always be good for her bottom line, but as a single mom raising her children and earning a living, she especially values the women who need the work.

Making Changes….

Change is inevitable. Nothing is forever. Change may mean relocating the business, shifting focus, letting go and delegating, slowing down, expanding or perhaps stopping. Businesses do not necessarily last forever.

By relying on public support for the arts and driving all over the state, Katenia Keller found a way to earn a living teaching dance in a remote rural location. However, she has yet to meet her needs as a professional dancer. One possibility for her is to move to Belfast, a thriving center for the arts on the coast, where she can attend classes. She wonders how much longer she will be able to drive the three-hour round trip and how much longer her body will be able to perform. She thinks about focusing on performing now and returning to teaching later.

While her business has been successful, it has short-changed other areas of her life; Carolann Ouellette feels that she is stagnating as an individual. While being a business owner allows for flexibility, in reality, in order for a business to succeed, the owner has to be engaged. Having realized the success of one dream and searching for something new, Carolann reports she delegated the running of her restaurant in Jackman last summer to others and took a position with the Maine Office of Tourism in Augusta.

Three years ago, finding herself working sixteen hours a day and close to burnout, Wendy Newmeyer cut back on her involvement in Maine Balsam Fir Products, with plans to sell the business on the horizon. But she has not cut back on her creativity. Instead, she is using her love of fabric and sewing to start a company manufacturing comfortable unisex clothing called Comfies.

Publicist Nancy Marshall took the major step of growing her business and balancing her life, when she turned forty. She moved her agency to Augusta, hired more staff and asked a long-time employee to manage the day-to-day operations. Like Newmeyer, Marshall is “adjusting her focus,” spending more time on her children, charitable work, and traveling. At the same time, she is expanding her consulting business and mentoring other public relations firms.

As the number of clients continues to grow, Karen King is letting go of her hands-on work in the field, turning it
“Success is being true to oneself and being willing to explore what that means. It isn’t necessarily about how many clients I have, though sometimes it feels that is the measure. The truth is, if I am successful in whom I am and how I live, that will attract to me all that is necessary to support me.”

— Barbara Joseph, Holistic Alternatives

“Just the longevity of Minikins is a mark of success, and that I have been able to support myself for all this time. I’ve been here on Main Street for ten years now, and I think that’s a nice thing for the community to have that stability. I also feel that I have been successful in providing income and meaningful work for many local stitchers.”

— Susun Terese, Minikins

“I don’t have a savings account; it’s pretty much a hand to mouth existence. I accept that because I feel it’s more important to love what you do. I feel what I have to give is valuable and important and that I’m affecting a lot of lives.”

— Katenia Keller, Flying Feet Studio

“In the winter I can ski between ten and twelve or ten and two and I can work [sew] in the morning from six to ten and again in the evening. I can set my own time.”

— Jane Barron, Alder Stream Canvas

“I can say I have done a good job at helping my community to be a better place to live in. I have done a good job of becoming the kind of person that I would respect in someone else.”

— Donna Hathaway, Certified Public Accountant

A Different Way of Looking…

At the outset of the project, we hoped that the women’s stories would illustrate new ways of looking at success and of measuring growth beyond the bottom line. We were not disappointed. Nor were we surprised that being successful meant many different things to these women. Surviving in business, providing work for others, doing quality work and being recognized for it, serving community, being free to determine their own schedules, and being true to themselves were some of the ways that they defined success.

“Success is when someone hires you and you go out and do the job and a month or a year later, somebody calls and says, ‘So-and-so said you did a really good job for them. Would you do mine?’ ”

— Corinne Leary, Soil Scientist and Site Evaluator

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