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Q & A with **NAOMI NEILSON HOWARD** of Native Trails



NAOMI NEILSON HOWARD
left, founder of Native Trails, poses in a hammered copper tub that her company manufactures and sells.

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY DAVID MIDDLECAMP

Global inspiration

Native Trails founder forges creative business path with artisans

By Julie Lynem
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Naomi Neilson Howard's success is as much because of her strong bond with artisans as the art they create for her business, Native Trails.

It started with the experiences she had as a child traveling to Mexico with her family, and continued into adulthood, when she often explored villages in central and southern Mexico on her own in her quest to find artistic talent.

"On occasion, I'd run low on cash while on a trip, but I always found a way around

that," Neilson Howard recalled. "If I didn't do something drastic, like calling home and having my roommate sell my car, I seemed to be able to turn trust and goodwill into working capital. I formed strong relationships with many artisan families because we worked together as equals, and they knew how much I respected and appreciated them."

"Even if they had dirt floors and only one light bulb in their home, it wasn't uncommon for them to insist I take more of their goods than I could pay for at the moment, knowing that I would soon send payment upon returning home," she said.

Later, when Neilson Howard transformed her company into a profitable enterprise, she gave back, providing interest-free loans for artisans to help finance their growth and expansion, as well as equipment — fax machines, scanners, email accounts and invoicing systems.

The partnership between Native Trails and the artists "has ensured that the artisan families and their businesses grow and thrive and continue to support the growing demand that we have created for their work," she said.

Neilson Howard, 41, shared her stories of inspiration and insights in a recent interview.

Q: When you look back on the beginning of Native Trails, did you ever imagine it would be where it is today?

A: I really did not. I focused more on whatever current challenge I faced, and whatever current goal I had in mind. One thing led to another, and around year five, things went gangbusters! It was exhilarating, after years of crazy hard work, to see my little business turning into something bigger. Of course, around 2008 the big economic slowdown and housing crash put the brakes on our growth for a few years, which was probably a good thing. We had a chance to “catch our breath” and implement better processes and technology to become much more efficient — and primed for real, healthy growth, which we are experiencing right now.

Q: Along those same lines, is there anything you would have done differently in those early years?

A: Sure ... and no ... it's hard to say. I did so many things the hard way, and I made some mistakes — but I learned so much by everything I went through that I can't imagine it any other way.

I wouldn't be able to do that kind of extensive travel and exploration alone now — I am grateful for my team at Native Trails that allows me to balance family and work life. The adventures I had in the early days are precious to me and are a huge part of our company story.

What adventures I had in the early years of Native Trails in my search for hidden artistic talent, from driving for days on dirt roads with no other car in sight in a quest to find a remote but renowned artisan village, to maneuvering the chaos of Mexico City with its signless, seven-way intersections, speeding daredevils and constant unexpected obstacles. I may have been found sleeping on reed mats on earthen floors after packing up 50 crates of ceramic folk art — and a day or two later sitting with a Huichol Indian shaman in his mountain hut, discussing sacred symbolism depicted in his artwork. On a given day, I may have awoken at 4 a.m. to start my day's journey, or I may have been just

NATIVE TRAILS

Business: Manufacturer of kitchen, bath, home decor and lifestyle items, which are hand-made by artisans from around the world. Materials used include recycled copper, repurposed barn wood and reclaimed wine barrels.

Year founded: 1996

Address: 2980 S. Higuera St., San Luis Obispo.

Web address:
www.nativetrails.net.

Top executives: Naomi Neilson Howard, founder/chief executive officer; Tim Blair, president.

Annual revenues: Declined to disclose but the privately held company is experiencing over 30 percent growth year-over-year, Neilson Howard said.

Annual profits: Declined to disclose, but profitability is up.

Background: Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, bachelor's degree in social sciences, 1997.

City of residence: Shell Beach with husband Christopher, a psychologist, and two young children.

getting to bed at that same hour after celebrating a wedding or town festival with our artisan families.

Q: Now to tackle present day, explain what your typical day is like. What are the tasks you spend the most time doing? What would you like to spend more of your day doing but never seem to get to?

A: I spend my time working on new products and initiatives, planning and strategizing with my team, and working with the marketing department on telling our story well. I have a great team at Native Trails, and usually there is someone else who can do something better than me. I try

to only focus on areas where I am really needed.

I travel several times a year, both to visit our artisans in Mexico and overseas, and for trade shows and business development. Nothing like my travel in the early days, when I was the only person visiting our artisans and customers — back then I spent at least half my time traveling, if not more.

If I could add hours to each day, I'd make more time to visit with our customers. I miss the days when I knew each of them on a personal level. With over 1,400 Native Trails dealers, that is simply no longer possible.

Q: How do you continue to motivate yourself, push yourself to do more and improve the company? Where does your inspiration come from?

A: I take part in an incredible leadership group, based here in SLO County, called Insight. It's a full day's education and peer mentoring every month, which has been invaluable to my growth as a leader. I am also naturally driven, and that keeps the company moving fast.

The original inspiration for Native Trails came from meeting amazingly talented artisans during my childhood travels to Mexico and realizing how much potential there was for them to dramatically improve their lives and communities. I continue to gain inspiration from the creative people we work with every day — from our artists and craftspeople who make our products to the designers and dealers who place them in beautiful spaces.

Q: I'm sure you expect the same of your employees and staff? What tools do you give them to be the best they can be?

A: We communicate a lot here at Native Trails. I think people feel motivated because they know they are appreciated and valued. Every person can have a tremendous impact here at Native Trails; every person is listened to. We create goals on the company level, department and individual level, and track them continually throughout the year.

If anyone struggles, we talk about it and figure out what they need, whether it's new software, outside training, or even an



adjusted workload or schedule.

Q: Describe your growth and how you got there. What do you attribute much of your success to?

A: Hiring people with more expertise than I has been key to Native Trail's success.

Since I started the company so young — at age 22 — I have always highly valued learning from others' experience. I ask a lot of questions and am always looking for new ideas; having an open mind and optimistic outlook makes a big difference in your level of success. I can thank my parents for teaching me that, whether or not they knew they were!

I'd honestly say that "failure" is not in my vocabulary. I have had many challenges and learning experiences, but I see them as an integral part of the journey. It is just so important to not give up when things get tough. Many people think they've failed

when it gets really difficult, but those are the times when it is usually most important to hang in, push a little harder, try a different angle or simply be patient.

Q: Are there any particular things you can point to that have been or remain obstacles to growth in San Luis Obispo County? Do you foresee staying here for the long term?

A: Travel outside of the area is more costly and time consuming — one of the costs of living away from a major hub of transportation. Also, it can be difficult to find people for specialized positions; that remains a challenge. Bringing people here from other areas is not easy, as the cost of living here tends to be considerably higher.

However, the people that want to be in SLO County often have a similar value system as we do — life and business are much more than the numbers. Quality of life, both our own and influencing that of others, is of

great importance. I travel outside of the area a lot, and I am very grateful to have the opportunity to raise a family here.

Q: Explain any future plans for growth, hiring, new products? With new products or offerings, how do you keep on top of changing consumer tastes? How have they evolved in recent years? What is the latest trend?

A: We recently launched NativeStone, a concrete sink collection that combines cement with natural jute fiber, making the material about 40 percent lighter than standard concrete. It's a perfect example of how we grow our product lines; we look for sustainable materials, or materials that can be repurposed, like the wood we use for many of our bath vanities and mirrors, and we think of possibilities for that material that have not been previously explored. People love the look of concrete but hate that it stains, so we spent years working on a

sealing process that renders our NativeStone impermeable to staining. It's exciting to see the response.

We are really excited lately about the resurgence of trough-style sinks. Last year, we launched a series of trough sinks for the bathroom in NativeStone, this year we are launching a series in hammered copper. These are wide basins that can accommodate a single person or multiple users and faucets, and we are helping to redefine this category of bath sinks that has evolved from rustic and utilitarian to chic and contemporary.

Trends are always changing, but we focus on materials that are timeless, so that the products we create will not go out of style. The ultimate in sustainability is long-term durability — we build things to last, and that means the style must endure as well as the function.

As always, we ask questions, listen and look for opportunities. Our products are always artisan made with an eco-friendly

focus, so that is the first set of filters any idea goes through. That keeps us true to who we are, and keeps us all inspired.

Q: What is the single biggest mistake or misconception entrepreneurs have when they are starting out? What advice would you give to them?

A: Thinking that starting a business will make life easy and more flexible is a big, common mistake. There are a lot of great ideas out there, but to make a successful business out of one is anything but easy. Being prepared for hard work and challenges makes them easier to take on and face. Flexibility can come in time, but since nobody cares as much as you do about your idea or business, the flexibility that gives you free time usually takes a while to get to! The idea of "working for myself" is, for most entrepreneurs, something of a myth — the complex web we must weave to create a successful company results in multiple layers of interdependencies that cannot be neglected.

Q: If you weren't running Native Trails, what other business would you start? What's on your to-do list?

A: Every time we travel, my husband and I dream about starting up some kind of business — a neuroscience travel destination? A surf/yoga eco-lodge? A school and nonprofit training center for underprivileged children? Maybe an organic farm/learning center in Central America? So many ideas to dream about ... good thing we are both pretty busy with what we've got going on.

In reality, I do love sharing ideas with my husband about how he can grow his impact through his private practice — he specializes in neuropsychology, including the highly specialized field of brain mapping and neurofeedback; we're working on how he can reach out and help more people who are suffering from ADHD, depression, brain injuries and other similar afflictions. It's very exciting and fulfilling work. 