

# Circles of Light

April 2001 – Number 11

## **Haida Gwaii Guitars** **Creating Musical Instruments That Are Works of Art**

by Ruth McVeigh

**T**wo young Aboriginal brothers in Vancouver are establishing a big name in the music business — not by playing guitars, but making them. **Greg Williams**, 28, is president of Haida Gwaii Guitars. His brother **Chris**, 31, is an equal partner, together with **Mark Vantaa**, 31, and **Robert Bustos**, 29. All four are musicians who got into guitar-making because of a love for music. They were also motivated by an appreciation for fine art, and curiosity as to what makes a good guitar different from an excellent one.

Together, the quartet has about 15 years' experience: the Williams brothers trained in making Larrivee guitars for about a year and also attended The American School of Luthier in Healdsburg, California. Vantaa, the most experienced, studied at Douglas College and supervised at Larrivee Guitars. Bustos studied under **Neil Douglas**, and also worked at Larrivee Guitars. Now they all learn from one another.

Haida Gwaii Guitars does more than make instruments with high-quality sound and structure. These are art objects, marketed through First Nations Employment Centre, Fournier Communications Art and by Premonitions, a branch of the Vancouver-based Spirit Wrestler Gallery that features quality items



Throughout the country, the businesses founded by young Aboriginal entrepreneurs are creating jobs, and contributing to the local and national economies. Foods, fashion, video production, transportation and high technology services are just a few of the areas where dynamic young entrepreneurs are making their mark.

from West Coast and other Aboriginal artists. The instruments combine fine craftsmanship in beautiful wood and other materials with Northwest Coast design and imagery. Each guitar is valued at over \$3,000.

Working with established artists, including **Patrick Wesley**, **Ed and Faye Russ**, **Bill Bellis** and **Randy Pryce**, the quartet produces unique guitars, custom-made for clients. Their materials include cedar, spruce and other hardwoods, mother-of-pearl, abalone, silver, gold and paint. The guitars incorporate such traditional Haida

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**"Haida Gwaii Guitars..."**  
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designs as the Raven, Eagle, Killer Whale, Wolf, Frog and Hummingbird, along with other animals and mythic beings. All the guitars are solid-body construction with ebony fretboards, mahogany necks and hardwood bodies of salvaged Sitka Spruce and cedar from Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands). The instruments' ebony bridges represent the traditional coastal canoe. The exquisite inlays, decoration and carving make each guitar an instrument in which a musician can take great pride.

In Greg Williams' words: "This imagery illustrates that Native culture is a lot more than music and art. The designs incorporate a tradition of understanding our ancestors, living with nature, giving back to a generous land in order to find balance of life."

Award-winning singer/songwriter **Sarah McLachlan** was offered a Haida Gwaii guitar as a gift because the four partners see her as an outstanding representative of Canada's music industry. Although they could have got good publicity out of the presentation, they chose not to do so. "If someone asks," Greg Williams says, "she will say where she got the guitar. That is enough for us."

It takes two full months to make a guitar, with each member of the quartet contributing what he knows best. Vantaa and Bustos deal with production; the Williams brothers handle finishing and artwork and consult with the artist to create a unique instrument.

The year-old company is currently producing 23 guitars, each with its own distinctive combination of art and wood. Anyone interested in learning more can view them at Spirit Wrestler Gallery in Vancouver, or visit the Web site at [www.premonitionarts.com](http://www.premonitionarts.com) \*

## **Pow-wow Figurines**

# **Husband-and-Wife Team Find Wide Markets for Dolls**

by Shannon Beauchamp

**R**uth Peters, 22, a member of the Soda Creek First Nation, and her husband, **Mike**, have strong connections to the pow-wow community — a network of people that is proving helpful in their chosen business.

Currently based in Kamloops, British Columbia, the couple are manufacturing First Nations pow-wow figurines. They secured \$6,000 in financing from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's (INAC's) First Nations and Inuit Youth Business Program and the Community Futures Development Corporation Central Interior First Nations Youth Portfolio. They then used these funds as operating capital, and to buy a computer. Now with access to the Internet, they are developing a site to help advertise and sell the dolls to a potentially larger market.

At present, they market their dolls to museums, galleries and casinos. The couple recently secured a contract with the Secwepemc Museum and Heritage Park to produce six dolls for the museum's permanent exhibits.

Ruth and Mike Peters have worked hard on putting together their business plan and cash flow, with guidance and assistance from entrepreneur **Brenda Eaton** of Castlegar, B.C.

*Ruth Peters is one of the 3,311 First Nations and Inuit youth who benefited from INAC's Youth Business Program in 1999-2000. For more information on the First Nations and Inuit Youth Business Program, please contact your INAC regional office or visit INAC's Web site to obtain the telephone number of your nearest Aboriginal Financial Institution. For more information, visit the Web site at [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/jeunesse-youth](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/jeunesse-youth) \**

**Shannon Beauchamp is an INAC employee of Ojibway ancestry.**



The Peters' pow-wow dolls are reaching an ever-growing market.

## Hill's Native Foods

# Looking to Larger Market for White Corn

by Raymond Lawrence

On those rainy April days, the demand for traditional white corn jumps. People want a hot, healthy corn soup to ward off the chill.

And that keeps **Scott Hill** hopping. On Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve, he carries on the business begun by his parents. When he took over the business, his father — a long-time hobby farmer — was sceptical that the small-scale operation could be turned into a viable livelihood. But his son managed to convince him.

The second challenge Hill faced was getting his mother to teach him the art of making traditional corn bread. He has since taken that original recipe and modified it into something he can call his own, using more precise weights and measures. This enables him to deliver an exact order, whereas using the older “a bit of this and a bit of that approach” resulted in varying batch sizes.

Hill makes a living from farming white corn and through his business, *Hill's Native Foods*. But there is something deeper driving him. “I come from a traditional background and doing this means a lot to me,” he says. “We’ve lost a lot of things and I take a lot of pride in doing this, knowing that I’m keeping a tradition alive.”

On less than a quarter of his about 30-hectare farm, Hill grows enough white corn to keep the food-production end of his business running for a year. “It actually works out well. This is a really hectic season (winter) and when it’s cold people want their corn soup. During U.S. holidays when people come home, I sell a lot as well,” he says.

White corn — unlike other more commercially known types that are the hybrids, and the products of years and years of research and development — does not result in high



Scott Hill with his five-year-old son, Austin.

yields. Hill says it might produce up to 90 percent less corn than something like common cattle corn.

It is the time-tested approach to preparing the corn that contributes to its unique flavour. “The corn cooks in hardwood ashes which eats off its hard, plastic-like outer hull. It has a lot to do with the taste of the end product and its colour,” Hill says. “There are lots of nutrients in the ashes that the corn absorbs as well.” The result is known as lyed corn — the essential ingredient in Mohawk corn soup.

“I market two products,” he explains. “I have lyed corn in two-litre bags, and my other product is the

white cornbread. I supply seven variety stores and five restaurants here on Six Nations. I caught the market just in time...I was able to catch it before it died right out.” At 27 years of age, he is now looking at other markets — either other nearby First Nations or the mainstream non-Aboriginal market. Although no one has as yet really tried to tap into that market, Hill points to a number of ethnic foods that have become international successes due to diligent work and focussed marketing.

For more information, telephone Scott Hill at (519) 445-0912. ★

*Raymond Lawrence is a freelance writer of Ojibway and European ancestry.*



## Wemogaz

# Diversified Service Station A Hit for Young Attikamek Entrepreneur

by Annabelle Dionne

A highly diversified gas station, which even supplies heating oil, has fulfilled the dream of a young Attikamek entrepreneur.

**Christian Boivin** first came up with the idea for the Wemogaz service station nearly four years ago. His dream gradually took shape after he joined forces with partner **André Ambroise**. Then in February 2000, Wemogaz, a Sonerco associate, opened its doors to become the second private enterprise in the Attikamek community of Wemontaci, Quebec.

The service station, which includes a convenience store, offers a range of products and services. Wemogaz sells hunting and fishing gear, rents video cassettes, has its own mini-bakery and sells souvenirs. And by also supplying heating oil, the business has ensured the strong foundation it needs for long-term survival. "We supply more than 125 homes in the community with heating oil, and we also sell to many of the outfitters and forest companies. So far, we are well ahead of our profit forecasts," Ambroise says.

Before Wemogaz, community members had to drive to La Tuque, nearly two hours away, to buy gas. "Gas was much less expensive there," says Boivin. "When we opened our station, we wanted to be competitive so that people would buy our products." Today, nobody would dream of going to La Tuque for gas.

"People are even proud of our company," Boivin adds.

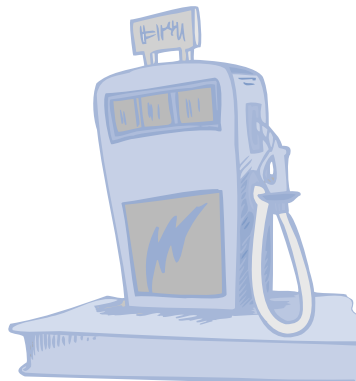
The two partners believe they owe their success to their tenacity. "When you want something, you have to persevere until you get what you want," Ambroise stresses. After submitting several grant applications, the duo



dedicated themselves to finding the funding they needed. In the end, they obtained more than \$460,000 in loans and grants.

The company now has five full-time and three part-time employees. The two owners are on the premises by 6:30 a.m. every day and they are there until the station closes at 11:00 p.m. Boivin and Ambroise agree they have to make some sacrifices, and are ready to do whatever it takes to succeed.

The young partners' commitment helped them win an award for "Best New Venture" last June from the Native Commercial Credit Corporation (known by its French acronym, SOCCA). "Our next goal is to win the 'Enterprise of the Year' award," confides Ambroise. ★



# Virtual Circle

## Internet Community Alive and Growing

by Karin Lynch

With unity, strength and vision as our guide, we will succeed," states Virtual Circle's Web site. Succeed is an understatement when it comes to this Aboriginal Internet community.

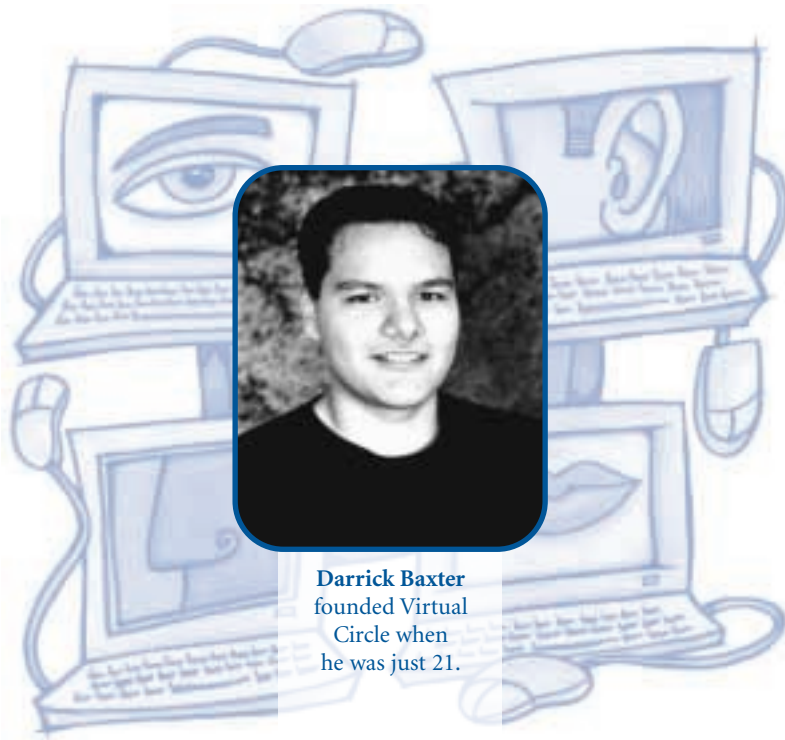
Virtual Circle is the inspiration of 25-year-old owner **Darrick Baxter**, a member of the Martin Falls First Nation near Thunder Bay, who now lives and works in Winnipeg. "I first got the idea back in high school," says Baxter, "when computer-related assignments were the order of the day. Since the notion of 'community' is so central to First Nations, it was natural for me to think of creating a virtual community on the Internet to present authentically Aboriginal perspectives."

He founded Virtual Circle — the Aboriginal Community, when he was just 21. "The Web site is a work in progress," says Baxter, who is also completing his BA in Political Science at the University of Winnipeg. The site changes and grows continuously, he adds, presenting "social, political and economic theories from an Aboriginal point of view."

Visitors can select from a wide variety of topics in the Aboriginal Index, visit the Guest Book and try the History Quiz. Baxter's latest venture is adding real estate services to Virtual Circle's offerings.

"Virtual Circle — the Aboriginal Community, first and foremost, is a service to mobilize First Nations communities and support the cause of Aboriginal people across Canada and the United States. There's absolutely no charge for anyone participating," Baxter emphasizes. "We have a business — Virtual Circle Multimedia — which supports our community work."

Virtual Circle Multimedia is a business success in its own right, and a natural spin-off of Virtual Circle.



**Darrick Baxter**  
founded Virtual  
Circle when  
he was just 21.

"The Virtual Circle Web site is the showcase for our Web design work, and the multimedia business is an outcome of getting the Virtual Circle site going in the first place," Baxter explains. Several First Nations professionals look after different aspects of the business while he concentrates on developing and designing Web sites for a wide range of businesses and organizations. These include Industry Canada, the Government of Manitoba, Aboriginal Business Canada and a fashion designer.

"We pride ourselves on our development and design, and technical savvy," he emphasizes. "Our quality shows. But equally important is our ability to help clients think through every aspect of their Internet future. That's why we stress training to help clients become their own Web site managers. This lowers their costs and also helps them steer their own destinies."

Clients also know that when they deal with Virtual Circle Media, they are contributing to the larger community that is Virtual Circle.

"I think that the Aboriginal community has to look toward politics and other avenues, but most importantly we must think of what **Matthew Coon Come** said about us missing the Industrial Revolution. Let's not miss the Information Technology Revolution. We have to develop ourselves — our professional selves — in this area, so that Aboriginal businesses are the backbone of our success. Just give us time, and Virtual Circle will prove that virtual reality can come true!"

Visit the Virtual Circle Web site at [www.vcircle.com](http://www.vcircle.com) ★

## Thursday Night Productions

# Films Bring Entrepreneur Full Circle

by Trevor Sutter

**T**asha Hubbard candidly admits she never really aspired to become an entrepreneur and business owner. She views her film and video production company less as a business venture and more as way to pursue her two passions — producing documentaries and exploring her Aboriginal roots.

“Owning my own business was really a means to an end,” explains the 27-year-old owner of Thursday Night Productions. “This company allows me to pursue what I enjoy most — making documentaries about the history of Saskatchewan and First Nations. I feel very lucky.”

Located on the Muskeg Lake Urban Reserve in Saskatoon, Thursday Night Productions was officially launched in September 1999. But Hubbard began her training for her career in film and video production long before she decided to venture out on her own.

After achieving her honours degree in English at the University

of Saskatchewan in 1994, she spent two years teaching English at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. Next she compiled a database of Aboriginal performers for the Saskatchewan Cultural Exchange Society.

The years spent enhancing her skills led to more opportunities in the fledgling Saskatchewan film industry. Because the movie business is so new and still so small in Saskatchewan, everyone knows everyone else, and her one-on-one contacts led to still more work.

She was later hired as a casting co-ordinator by veteran Saskatchewan filmmaker **Doug Cuthand**, whose company, Blue Hill Productions in Saskatoon, had teamed up with a Montreal-based firm in the production of the television mini-series, *Big Bear*.

The film not only heightened her interest in filmmaking, it also allowed her to explore a part of her life that was missing as a First Nation infant

adopted and raised by a non-First Nation family. “Knowing more about my other family and my history has not only enriched me, but it has also created new relationships for me and my adoptive family,” she says. “It has been a catalyst to learn more about my culture and history, and has allowed me to develop a greater sense of community.”

*Big Bear* was also Hubbard’s springboard into the casting and film-making industry. She found herself in the right place at the right time. Casting for commercials and other film and video productions quickly became her mainstay as an abundance of parts opened up for Aboriginal actors.

She has done casting for Regina’s Minds Eye Productions and Saskatoon’s Edge Productions, as well as for CBC’s epic series, *Canada: A People’s History*.

Hubbard’s involvement with *Big Bear* eventually lead to her first documentary, *Circle of Voices*, co-produced with her mentor, Cuthand. The documentary chronicled the lives of a group of Aboriginal youth involved in an urban theatre troupe.

“It allowed me to get my feet wet in terms of directing,” she says. “It was sink or swim, but the experience gave me the confidence that I have good instincts.”

Hubbard still collaborates with Cuthand, with whom she shares office space at Blue Hill Productions. The twin companies are at work on a series for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Hubbard is also now involved in a National Film Board (NFB) production as a trainee director, and is producing her company’s first documentary in partnership with the NFB.

Contact Thursday Night Productions at (306) 477-4572. ★



Tasha Hubbard’s two passions are producing documentaries and exploring her Aboriginal roots.



## Hiqiniq Services

# Taxi and Freight Hauling in Nunavut

by Shannon Beauchamp

**A** loan for a van opened the way for a busy taxi and freight delivery service in Taloyoak, Nunavut.

**Noah Nashaooraitook**, 26, started Hiqiniq Services in November 1999 with a micro-loan provided by the Kitikmeot Economic Development Commission (KEDC) under the First Nations and Inuit Youth Business Program of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). The loan helped him buy a van which he then used to secure a mail-hauling contract with Canada Post Corporation.

Since that first contract, Nashaooraitook has won others hauling freight for Northern Stores, the Co-op store, and the local health centre, school and college. He was also awarded a contract by Kivalliq Air to provide passenger and cargo agent services in Taloyoak.

In the fall of 2000, Nashaooraitook expanded his business, starting a local taxi service with the purchase of a 15-passenger van. Financing for the purchase of the van came from several sources, including equity built up in the business, contribution funding from the Government of Nunavut's Business Development Fund and Grants to Small Business programs, and loan funding from Kitikmeot Corporation's Kitikmeot Business Assistance Program.

Nashaooraitook's sales from freight hauling and taxi services are projected at close to \$48,000 for 2001. He expects to create one part-time job



Noah Nashaooraitook started his taxi and freight delivery service in 1999.

for a local Inuk in the coming year to help him handle the increasing workload. He is also grateful for the business support and advice he receives from both KEDC and the local economic development officer.

Not content to rest on his laurels, Nashaooraitook is looking for other opportunities to expand his business, and provide additional services to his community.

*Nashaooraitook is one of the 3,311 First Nations and Inuit youth who benefited from INAC's Youth Business Program in 1999-2000. The program offers seed capital and mentoring to*

*First Nations and Inuit youth living on-reserve or in recognized communities, who are interested in starting a business. It is managed by the National Aboriginal Capital Corporation Association, which delivers the program across the country through its network of member corporations — Aboriginal Financial Institutions. \**



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# Big Soul Productions Duo's Creative Drive Makes Company Grow

by Diane Koven

What began as an idea for a television series has evolved into a thriving media and communications business for youthful Aboriginal entrepreneurs **Laura Milliken** and **Jennifer Podemski**. The “twenty-something” co-producers of *The Seventh Generation*, a 13-part series seen on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), have combined creativity and business savvy to build their production company, Big Soul Productions.

When the women joined forces less than two years ago, both brought extensive media experience to the venture. “Laura had a better sense of business than I did at that time,” Podemski says, “and I knew things about the film business that she didn’t, so we were a great match.” While overseeing the development and production of the series, they learned the business side of things on an “as-needed” basis.

“From opening our first business bank account to incorporating, to understanding the legalities of having a production company, we learned from just throwing ourselves into it,” Podemski explains. The legal implications of partnerships and corporations; contracts and sub-contracts; financing and facilities management are just a few of the many details they had to deal with, along with the creative side of the project.

“At the beginning,” Podemski says, “we worked from home; we didn’t have an office. When money started coming in, we set up shop. A lot of money came out of our own pockets, but before long we had a fully functioning office for the production company. At that point, we decided that we better have a business plan.”



**Laura Milliken and Jennifer Podemski** now employ five people at Big Soul Productions.

Things have moved very quickly for Big Soul Productions. With five employees, a bigger office and more equipment, the company is growing rapidly. Projects and contracts have come solely through word of mouth,



based on achievements to date. Milliken and Podemski now have big ideas for expansion. “We are really entering into the communications area,” Podemski says, “trying to do more graphics and workshop design. We also have a cutting-edge technical side with high-tech equipment.”

As the business grows, the founders’ roles must evolve as well. “For Laura and me,” adds Podemski, “it is coming to the point where, after this year, we will probably want to be more in a position of being executive producers, in the office managing producers in the field. Right now, we have only one person in our administration office and we travel the country shooting two different shows — *The Seventh Generation*, now in its second season, and *Into the Music*, which will be airing next fall on APTN.”

What lies ahead for this dynamic duo? “We just want to get bigger,” Podemski says. “There are so many areas we want to focus on. We are starting to recognize our strengths as creative women. We have to really persevere and stay grounded.”

For a closer look at Big Soul Productions, check out the Web site at [www.bigsoul.net](http://www.bigsoul.net) ★





# Portrait

## Corey Hill Mohawk Innovative Youth Entrepreneur

by Wendy MacIntyre

*“That’s the kind of person I am. I’ve got goals. I make it so far, and then I want to go farther with them.”*

At the age of 25, Corey Hill amazed her family and friends in Ohsweken, Ontario, by radically changing her career. Leaving her job at the Six Nations Natural Gas Company, Hill made the graceful transition to founder and owner of Ohsweken’s first health spa. In the process, her absolute determination, hard work and abundant, fresh ideas made her a role model for aspiring young Aboriginal entrepreneurs across the country.

A member of Six Nations of the Grand River, Hill grew up in a close-knit family of four children. Her parents believed in working hard and setting goals. “My mom and dad always pushed us in school. They said: ‘Get a career and do something for yourself before you have kids.’”

Hill was first attracted to welding as a young girl: “When I was growing up, I guess I was a tomboy. Now, I’m the opposite. I always hung around with my dad. He was a carpenter. I liked carpentry and welding and took all the tech classes, where I was the only girl. That doesn’t mean I’m muscular,” she adds. “It was hard for me when I picked up the metal because I’m very small, petite....”

Throughout her teenage years, Hill’s parents reinforced the values of the work ethic and independence. “They weren’t strict,” clarifies Hill. “But now I’m glad they were a little hard on me.”

“My mom went without so that we could have things. These days, I try to give to them, because they were there for us.”

Hill’s sister, Rachel, who is two years older, was and continues to be an important influence in her life: “I’m so lucky to grow up with a sister such a close age...If there was anything kids were doing bad, we stuck together. We didn’t have to be a follower. We both stuck in there for each other.”

At the age of 17, Hill went to college in Guelph to get her diploma as a welding technician. She was the only woman and the only Aboriginal person in her class. While she encountered no obstacle because she was Aboriginal, she was definitely treated differently because she was a woman. But once her fellow students saw how hard she worked, and that she could do what the course required, she was accepted.

After graduating from college, Hill worked three years for a local gas company. Each winter, the company would lay its employees off. During one of these periods, she got a job encapsulating herbs. It was then she got interested in the alternative use of herbs. This led her to work in Brantford for a business specializing in a range of alternative therapies.

“That’s what changed my whole career. Because I was really interested in helping people. I saw how much it helped. And it’s alternative. That’s what really caught me. Right away in my heart, I wanted to open my own business. I wanted something like this for the reserve.”

Through the Grand River Employment and Training program, she started on-the-job training in Brantford, learning aromatherapy; waxing, manicures and pedicures; and the background knowledge for herbal products.

At first, she says, her father questioned the wisdom of her plan. “‘Why?’ he said. ‘You’ve got all your welding and you’re going the opposite way.’ But it’s just that I got interested in the whole alternative field,” explains Hill. “I take care of myself. I’m into alternatives, eating healthy and exercising...so it’s something I wanted to teach other people.”

For help with her business plan, Hill went to the Six Nations New Credit Community Futures program. “They’re great,” she says. “They pointed me in the right direction for training, and for the business plan. Without them, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Hill opened her spa, “Choosing To Live Healthy,” in 1996, renting space in a shopping plaza. “My tanning beds got me through the first year, because everybody knew what it was.”

Right away, Hill started wholeheartedly promoting all her alternative services. She drew customers in with her tanning and hair salon, as well as offering other services such as aromatherapy, which she is licensed to practise. Hill also offered her aromatherapy services outside her business location, helping out at the community birthing centre and the men’s and women’s shelter. “I feel good about helping them and it’s good for the community,” she says.

After two years in her rented location, Hill decided to expand. “I wanted to open a new building where I could offer more services such as a gymnasium. That’s the kind of person I am. I’ve got goals. I make it so far, and then I want to go farther with them.”

Hill designed the whole building herself, with the help of family and friends. “It took me a long time. I would get so far, and there would be a block. It was hard for me to find land, and to get a loan.”

Hill persisted despite the blocks. She succeeded in getting a loan through the Two Rivers Business Development Centre and opened her brand-new premises in downtown Ohsweken in February 1999. The new building has a full gymnasium, as well as a smaller private one for people who feel awkward working out with others. “They rent it out by the hour,” explains Hill. “There’s no other gym like that around here, not even in Brantford.”

The main gymnasium attracts all ages, she says. “I really feel good about that because we have things to accommodate people who never joined a gym before.”

“Choosing To Live Healthy” also has its own natural juice bar thanks to Hill’s 15-year-old sister Amanda, who came up with all the recipes and did a business plan for the operation. Other innovations include salads and veggie trays for customers working out at lunch-time, and a day-care so that busy mothers can bring their children when they want a therapy or work-out session. A young woman from Ohsweken is running the day-care as her own business, and part of Hill’s team. Hill is also training two co-op students from the community. “I know how hard it was for me to struggle,” she says. “And now I’m helping other youth.”

Hill’s health spa has been featured in the *National Post*, and on cable television. “My family’s really proud of me, and they’re always supportive,” she says. But her main rewards are from her clients.

“I’m a people person” she says. “Right away, it makes me feel good if I helped somebody. That’s my reward. I want to keep doing it and working at it. I can’t stop.”

