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ACOA AT WORK IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Women Entrepreneurs



Annette Bourque, President of Art FX Inc. in Dieppe NB, proudly sits by one of her company's newly-designed Retail Merchandising Units, destined for the seven terminals of the Philadelphia International Airport.

Women Entrepreneurs and Leaders in New Brunswick

In this edition, *ACOA at Work* focuses on women entrepreneurs, a group that is on the rise, both in its numbers and in its impact on the economy.

Visionary, talented and driven, the women profiled in these pages span many sectors: manufacturing, science research, arts and culture, sports and recreation and tourism.

Herein, we talk to them about their stories, the rewards and challenges of being a woman entrepreneur and the elements that helped them to succeed.

Many of these women have sought support from ACOA through programs such as the Business Development Program, the Atlantic Innovation Fund, and, more recently, the Women in Business Initiative.

This publication showcases the spirit of entrepreneurship that is alive and thriving among women entrepreneurs and leaders in New Brunswick.



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BUILDING A STRONGER ECONOMY TOGETHER

Form and Function are Key to Art FX's Success

by Paul C. J. LeBlanc

Every so often one comes across an entrepreneur who has the ability to embrace change, sees opportunity behind every door and possesses the confidence to reinvent themselves when necessary. Annette Bourque, President of Art FX Inc., is such an entrepreneur.

Since 1999 Art FX, located in Dieppe, NB, has been in the business of designing and manufacturing Retail Merchandising Units (RMUs). The company's goal to "exceed the client's expectations" is a sign of its commitment to quality, dedication to service and the strength of its leadership.

The road has had some bumps along the way, admits Bourque; however, today, she finds her company among the top three in the industry.

In fact, earlier this year, Art FX beat out six American firms with its successful bid to work with the Philadelphia International Airport, a seven terminal facility with one of the largest retail programs in the United States. Project criteria, says Bourque, pushed the envelope for RMU design and worked to catch the eye of a new client base.

Not only is the company winning tenders, it is receiving invitations to compete. Recently, Art FX was approached to work on an upcoming project with CBL Properties, one of the top five developers in the US. In addition, the company has been asked to submit a design proposal for an outdoor unit for Chelsea Outlet Malls. Their owner, Simon Properties, with 250 properties, happens to be the largest shopping centre developer in North America.

It all started, Bourque explains, in 1986 when she decided to use her vast retail and merchandising experience to branch out on her own by opening Art FX.

The company was originally intended to be a one-stop shopping outsource for architectural products and the visual merchandising industry. Initially Bourque geared her products towards retailers. Soon after, she expanded to shopping centres. The early years were successful with contracts to produce large theme décor and sets in retail settings. Although the company manufactured some RMUs during this period, theme décor (ie., Christmas and seasonal displays) was its main focus.

In 1999, Bourque moved her company into its first permanent building. Along with a new

location, says Bourque, came the need for a product that was not as seasonal.

"We looked towards the RMUs. I felt that if we could launch a product we knew, to an industry that we knew, where we were known, there would be a lot of cross marketing benefits," she explains. "I felt that there was a niche in the market, that the industry was ready for a new player."

With its new direction, Art FX now plays in the big leagues of the industry. Bourque credits the response to the company's product to its uniqueness, which she believes comes, at least in part, from the approach she takes to design.

"I always look at the initial concept and how it will work for the retailer. A lot of the units we see from a design perspective . . . are over the top beautiful, but don't work. Other units have the function but lack the form. What we come up with is a true balance between form and function."

That balance is creating growth. According to Bourque, the company had projected 17 new jobs by 2003 and is now up to 30.

"The plan is to double our sales this year and to reach \$10 million in five years," says Bourque.

Bourque admits there have been challenges along the way, not the least of which were starting out in a remote location, with no references or proper capital.

"It's like the chicken and the egg," Bourque explains. "The bank doesn't want to invest all that money if you don't have any sales, and you can't get any sales if you don't have the building. I chose to follow my gut instinct and to invest our money into the prototypes, the marketing materials, and going to the shows. I can have a warehouse of product but without any clients, what good is that?"

The dynamic and highly driven businesswoman — also the proud mother of an eight-year-old daughter — credits much of her



"I always look at the initial concept and how it will work for the retailer. A lot of the units we see from a design perspective . . . are over the top beautiful, but don't work. Other units have the function but lack the form. What we come up with is a true balance between form and function."

success to her five-year partnership with the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA). According to Bourque, the Agency's support, through a number of programs, has made it possible for the company to purchase equipment, hire a plant engineer, access the expertise of a financial consultant and to take on a marketing intern who was later kept on as an employee.

"In all honesty I can say that had it not been for ACOA this would not be happening. And not just because of the financial support ACOA has given our company for equipment purchases and marketing, but because of the mentoring and the assistance they have given me," she explains.

Debbie LeBlanc-Leger, Account Manager at ACOA's NB Southeast District Office, admires Bourque's willingness to learn and unassuming attitude.

"It's remarkable how she has swung herself around from being a seasonal business to having a full-time operation in another area," says LeBlanc-Leger. "She has shown an incredible ability to change . . . to move on from one market to another and restructure."

Ms. Bourque says she is intrigued by opportunity and believes that people have not yet seen the extent of her company's potential.

"With e-mail, communications, and information technology, there's so much opportunity out there, regardless of gender. When I was a girl in Moncton, I could never have imagined how I could reach a global market without a tremendous amount of money to do it. Really, today, it is doable for anybody."



A Commitment to Sustainable Development

At ACOA we believe that a healthy environment is an essential pre-condition to the development and maintenance of a strong, growing and sustainable economy.

We are committed to protecting the environment of this region by setting an example in the environmental management of ACOA's own operations, by promoting sustainable businesses in the Atlantic region, and by advancing the environmental industry sector in Atlantic Canada.

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Swimming in the Big Leagues

By Kalie Hatt-Kilburn

For Rachael Ritchie, the best things in life don't always happen according to plan. Sometimes, they happen when you're simply seizing the opportunities life sends your way.

Looking at Ritchie's long list of accomplishments, which include degrees from the University of British Columbia and Oxford, as well as notable positions with research labs at Oxford and Harvard, clearly, this philosophy has served her well.

Recently, Dr. Ritchie has taken on the role of Department Head of Food, Fisheries and Aquaculture for the Fredericton-based Research and Productivity Council (RPC).

She started with RPC in 1998. Since that time, her cutting-edge work in the field of aquaculture research has become a major service line for the organization. Currently, with help from ACOA's Atlantic Innovation Fund (AIF), Ritchie is leading the charge on a research project that could help revolutionize an industry that generates more than \$200 million a year in New Brunswick.

According to Paul Smith, Strategic Development Officer with ACOA's AIF program, Dr. Ritchie is one to watch.

Referring to her as a "great find" for New Brunswick, he adds: "RPC chose her to lead this important project because they recognized her outstanding qualifications as an eminent researcher and project leader."

As a woman working in the science and research field, Dr. Ritchie is, admittedly, part of a minority. In fact, Statistics Canada's Women in Canada report indicates that, in 2003, just 22% of professionals working in natural sciences, engineering and mathematics occupations were women.

But Ritchie believes that the apparent balance between the number of men and women who are currently studying science at the undergraduate level may mean more equitable numbers in the future.

"So long as we keep working to structure the workplace in a way which encourages women, the number of women studying science could soon be matched by the number of women working in science."

When Ritchie finished her undergrad at UBC, she didn't have a plan herself. "I was fortunate because I had experience working in labs for summer jobs, so working in a lab after university was a natural move for me," she says, adding that it was only after a year working as a research associate at Oxford that she realized she wanted to do a PhD and went on to specialize in human genetics research. She later accepted research positions focusing on the links between genetics and disease, including a job at Harvard University's Children's Hospital, where she completed a post doctoral degree.

The plan at that time, says Ritchie was to "stay in that field, stay on with research, get my own lab and be a pure academic forever."

But, when the opportunity came to move to Fredericton with her husband, a professor of Philosophy at UNB, she realized immediately the benefits that living in a smaller centre could provide her and her family.

"Luckily RPC realized that even though I had never touched a fish, my techniques were directly transferable. So, I came here on an industrial research fellowship for two years, and that allowed me to get established and build some connections with people in the industry."

Ritchie began to study salmon populations, developing a new line of services for RPC that helps salmon farmers identify the unique genetic code of their fish. By determining the ancestry of the fish (i.e., whether they are related), the technology is working to help fish farmers increase the genetic diversity of their stock, thus reducing its susceptibility to disease. Recently, RPC has employed the testing to help farmers who want to put their fish in U.S. waters.

Surveillance for diseases, another major aspect of aquaculture research at RPC, has also helped the organization to move in new directions.

"We try to be proactive to stay competitive and attract funding, so we're always on the cutting edge of any new technologies. We read journals, attend conferences and are on the lookout for the latest technology to see how we can apply it."

It was through this proactivity that RPC learned of Motorola's new biochip technology—at the time being used in humans and animals—and realized they might use it to improve the

way farmed fish are tested for disease. By using it on site, they could test and deliver results immediately, rather than waiting for samples to return from the lab.

RPC approached the technology giant about the possibility of embarking on a research partnership. With the help of the Atlantic Innovation Fund, they were able to secure the deal.

"Without AIF, we could never play with some of these big companies, which can give so much and can generate so many benefits down-stream," explains Ritchie, who adds that the program has offered her organization greater flexibility to do longer-term research and a little more breathing room to produce better returns in the end. Since part of RPC's mandate is to work with industry to increase its competitiveness, AIF, she says, is also a good strategic fit because its funding is contingent on a strong commercial plan.

"I think that AIF is better even than some of the National Centres of Excellence in that it has required partnership and a commercialization path, and most researchers didn't speak that language even just five years ago."

The RPC project is an excellent fit with both of the AIF program's innovation and commercialization components.

"A successful alliance and partnership with Motorola is the type of thing we need to do here in New Brunswick, because it will lead to other opportunities," says Ritchie. "Success breeds success, and I'm sure this is just the first of many R&D partnerships we can build in New Brunswick to help Atlantic Canada lead the world in aquaculture biotechnology."



Dr. Rachael Ritchie is leading the charge on a research project that could help revolutionize an industry that generates more than \$200 million a year in New Brunswick.

Meeting the Needs of Women Entrepreneurs: The Women in Business Initiative

By Ann L. Kenney

The Women in Business Initiative (WBI) is just two years old and it's already proving to be a success. Statistics show that women entrepreneurs will continue to have a significant impact on the economy in the coming years. And helping women entrepreneurs continue to grow and compete is what ACOA's WBI is all about.

Jayne Clarke is ACOA NB's Women in Business Initiative Coordinator. In this role, she oversees five WBI development officers around the province. Recently, she gave us an update on the importance of the WBI and how women have responded to it.

Q. Why was the WBI created?

A. Statistics show that the growth of women-owned businesses has been dramatic. Here in New Brunswick, women are setting up and expanding businesses in diverse sectors and playing an important role in our economy.

On the other hand, women represent only 34% of the self-employed workforce in the province. Studies show that women face greater challenges when it comes to accessing financing, accessing business networks, having all the necessary tools to manage a business, lacking mentoring as well as running a business and a family.

So, the WBI has been designed to help women address these needs and provide the tools and skills to help them reach their full potential as entrepreneurs.

Q. How would you describe women entrepreneurs in New Brunswick?

A. From experience I would describe women entrepreneurs as passionate, determined and talented. And to cite a recent study, *A Portrait of Women Business Owners in New Brunswick in 2003* by Calhoun and Associates, women are also:

- Creating businesses at a rate four times that of men: between 1992 and 2002, the number of female self-employed in the province increased by 32%; compared to an increase in the number of male self-employed of 7%;
- Embarking on businesses that generally are in the Goods and Services – producing sector;
- Operating year-round (84%);
- Working in rural areas or small towns with fewer than 5,000 people (44%);
- Having well-established, older businesses (55% are ten years or older);
- Starting their business at age 37, which

supports the theory that women, usually conservative and cautious in nature, are waiting until after they have started a family, and are ready to pursue their goals with passion and determination.

Q. As the WBI Coordinator for New Brunswick what are some of the major things you would like to help women entrepreneurs achieve?

A. I think we can be successful if we can accomplish three things:

- 1) Strengthen the management and business skills of women;
- 2) Improve their access to capital and business support services;
- 3) Increase the involvement of women entrepreneurs selling in international markets and in knowledge-based industries.

Q. This is a large to do list. How are you going to achieve these three goals and how will you let women entrepreneurs in New Brunswick know that you are out there to help them?

A. Well, when we say the WBI is a coordinated effort – we really mean it! We've worked hard to organize ourselves for maximum efficiency and developed numerous activities for women to access. Let me explain how we're organized and then I'll elaborate on some activities we're undertaking:

- One of ACOA New Brunswick's strengths is its vast business network across New Brunswick. It's exactly the kind of network women entrepreneurs need.
- ACOA NB has partnered with the New Brunswick Association of Community Business Development Corporations (CBDCs) to administer the WBI on our behalf. They've hired five development officers in Fredericton, Saint John, Shediac, Bathurst and Grand Falls. These officers provide business counselling and community outreach services to women in business. In addition, they offer programs and sessions that allow women to access business management training and consultants to help them identify business opportunities and solve problems.
- This year, we are planning a wide range of activities specifically designed to meet the needs of women. They include:
 - i) information sessions about WBI to raise awareness about the program among women entrepreneurs and the people who work with them, such as financial institutions.

- ii) information sessions on financial and marketing training to help women strengthen their management and business skills;

- iii) mentorship opportunities;

- iv) the coordination of three networks across New Brunswick to allow women to interact, share experiences and provide peer support;

- v) export opportunities that will encourage women entrepreneurs to participate in existing trade activities;

- vi) a Women in Business conference to provide access to important workshops and networking opportunities; and

- vii) a province-wide newsletter.

Q. How have women entrepreneurs responded so far to this initiative?

A. To date we have had an amazing response:

- 930 counselling sessions with Women in Business development officers across New Brunswick;
- 163 women who have benefited from business management training; and
- a women's entrepreneur network created in Grand Falls which is encouraging more women to help women.

For more information about WBI, call: 1-800-668-1010 (Canada/New Brunswick Business Service Centre) or 1-800-561-4030 (ACOA NB). They will refer you to the WBI development officer nearest you.

Trudy Gallagher – An Entrepreneur “Bejewel”ed with Business Vision

By Carolyn Grey

Artisan and entrepreneur, craftsperson and business woman...these words only begin to describe a business savvy and “bejeweled” Trudy Gallagher.

Adorned with a dazzling necklace of glass beads in all shapes and colours interspersed among complementary silver wire and formed to reflect the beauty of each stone, Gallagher wears her creations well. And it shows.

In business for more than 16 years, Bejewel by Trudy Gallagher Inc. has grown steadily from a one-person, local operation to a company that today boasts a staff of nine full-time employees as well as clients from around the world – all from her small artisan studio.

Establishing her business in Fredericton in 1988, Gallagher’s visionary approach was evident from the beginning.

“Bejewel originally started as a one-person studio but I decided very quickly that I needed to expand,” says Gallagher, who took every business course offered, from accounting to shipping. “I knew that I had to become a whole lot more serious (and) a whole lot more business-minded.”

Over the years, Gallagher’s designs and her business acumen have served to grow the company. Today, Bejewel wares, including custom pieces, are sold to retail stores, galleries and private clients across the country and abroad. The company’s jewelry and giftware has made the covers of *WHERE Winnipeg*, Atlantic Craft Trade Show and *CanadExport* publications, and has been featured in the pages of *Canadian Living* magazine.

Like other women business owners in the province, Gallagher has identified a list of priorities for Bejewel including making better use of available technology in managing her business.

“I think that a lot of craftspeople are really hands-on,” describes Gallagher. “We don’t have a great affinity for technology, but if you want to compete in the global marketplace you have to be business savvy. And that means being current about the tools of business.”

The company not only maintains an attractive website, it is using innovative technology to modernize its day-to-day business management practices and to improve the company’s efficiencies.

It is Gallagher’s attention to and understanding of every aspect of her business that makes her successful as an entrepreneur says Donna Delong, an Account Manager for ACOA who has worked with the entrepreneur.

“She is a designer and a craftsperson but she’s also a business woman who has taken her work and made it into a profitable operation,” explains Delong, who worked with Gallagher to secure a loan under ACOA’s Business Development Program (BDP) for improvements to company business management practices, including its ability to monitor and forecast product sales and client trends.

Gallagher is excited about the benefits that improved day-to-day operations will have in the next phase of Bejewel’s growth as a company.

“It’s going to take my company from being amateur to professional,” predicts Gallagher, adding that better business practices will save the company hundreds of person-hours in everything from inventory to overall paper work in general.

In fact, the company has already hired an additional employee and foresees a need for another support person in the near future.

According to Gallagher, ACOA has always been there for small business. “They’ve been incredibly supportive to me over the years,” says Gallagher who has, with Agency assistance, taken business courses, purchased new equipment, built a display booth and attended important trade shows, a must for any design business looking to grow.

While Gallagher continues to expand her client base through annual markets around Atlantic Canada, she is also actively working to develop international markets.

The company currently does a modest level of business in the United States, Italy and England. Recently, Gallagher took part in an international trade mission to France with a side trip to England.

Although warned not to expect any quick results when dealing with international trade missions, Bejewel proved an exception. Gallagher has received a formal invitation to be a featured company at an exhibition with an anticipated 85,000 people in France. With an offer of financial assistance and a match-maker to introduce Gallagher to contacts in the country’s business community, Bejewel will be featured as one of the highlights of the show if they accept the offer.

“A lot of preparation goes into such a big event,” she explains, adding “by going to the trade show in France, it would take my company to the next level.”

In addition to taking the time to grow her business, Gallagher is also dedicated to giving back to the community. To this end, she is currently a mentor in ACOA’s mentorship program, an initiative which pairs business owners with new entrepreneurs to offer advice and support on any area of business development.

“... if you want to compete in the global marketplace you have to be business savvy. And that means being current about the tools of business.”

As for the future of her own company, Gallagher’s vision for Bejewel is as dazzling as her creations.

“We have a look that is original, that’s our own and that is identifiable but there is a huge field between where we are right now and where we would like to be,” she says, suggesting that she would like to see Bejewel’s limited edition jewelry adorn models on the runways of Paris and Milan.

“If you’re really good at business, marketing, advertising and promoting yourself, you can be fantastic. I don’t see barriers. I see the future as wide open for us.”



Artisan and entrepreneur Trudy Gallagher, owner of Bejewel, displays her “wearable art” – jewelry that is winning customers across the country and around the world.

Auberge Les Jardins Inn: Welcome Home!

By Stéphanie Bilodeau

Francine Landry was destined to succeed in business. For almost 20 years, she worked with others in the community, helping them to achieve their entrepreneurial goals and learning from their examples. One day, she decided to take the leap herself. Today, as co-owner of Edmundston's Auberge Les Jardins Inn, she is an entrepreneur in her own right whose business skills are recognized across Northwest New Brunswick.

Landry's introduction to entrepreneurship began during childhood, when her father, a businessman in the electronics industry, would bring home parts each evening with a view to creating something new.

"We were brought up in the spirit of innovation and invention," she explains.

At college, Landry augmented her early understanding of business with studies in administration, earning a Bachelor of Commerce. After stints as an accountant, and even a manager of a women's clothing store, she eventually decided to try her hand at economic development with the Northwest Industrial Commission.

Fourteen years as an economic development officer and assistant director with the organization, now known as Enterprise Madawaska, brought her together with members of the tourism industry, a driver of the region's economy.

"I organized many tourism-related projects, such as the International Snowmobilers' Festival, which helped grow my interest in the

sector. I was always involved with the entrepreneurs; the motivation required to launch my own business came from seeing others succeed at it."

In 1994, she became even more familiar with tourism operation when her then partner (now husband) Valmont Martin, decided to buy the Motel Le Brayon et Chalets.

For five years, the two worked to build the business, Martin full-time with Landry helping out in the evenings and on weekends. One day, they learned of plans for the new four-lane Trans-Canada Highway, just kilometres away and decided it was time to make a move.

"We stood to lose a good number of our customers—mainly travelling tourists and professionals in transit," says Landry, explaining it was then that she and Martin decided to buy a piece of land near the New Brunswick Botanical Garden in St. Jacques and the new highway.

"We demolished the farmhouse that stood on the land, then worked on our plans to build a high-end inn and relocate our 32 motel and cottage units."

The challenges were many, particularly since at the time, Landry continued to hold down a full-time "day job" at the Commission and remained active in the community. Despite the difficulties that came with finding a balance between all these responsibilities, according to Landry, her position with the Commission was invaluable in helping her to identify partners, such as the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), that could assist with key challenges in building the business.



Francine Landry has welcomed thousands of visitors to the Auberge Les Jardins Inn over the last year. Among them, celebrities such as Acadian singer Wilfred LeBouthillier, writer Antonine Maillet and ex-Montreal Canadiens' coach Jean Perron, have enjoyed the Inn's warm hospitality.

"Thanks to my community involvement and my work with the Industrial Commission, I knew most of the programs, contact persons and agencies. I went knocking on the doors of these people and organizations. For me, it was quite natural."

Loans from the Business Development Bank and later from ACOA gave Landry and Martin the access to the capital they needed to complete construction of the new Inn over the winter months. By April, the Auberge Les Jardins Inn was open for business.

Sales tripled right from the first year.

Today the Inn, rated 4 stars under the Canada Select Program, employs 20 people, including Landry's son, and is gaining a reputation as one of the best places to eat in New Brunswick.

Landry credits the Inn's success to superior quality service.

"Besides the guest rooms, we have meeting rooms, a year-round kitchen, a pavilion and a pool as well as a range of business services and recreational activities. Plus, we continuously work to improve," she explains, describing the Inn's unique theme décor which features official flowers of Canada's provinces and territories as well as certain species of trees.

Care, says Landry, has been taken to create a warm and friendly atmosphere.

"We wanted to build an inn where guests would feel at home. We've put up family photos and souvenirs from our foreign travels; there's even an easy chair we bought from a neighbour."

While Landry officially left her job at the Commission in 2000 to concentrate fully on running the Inn, four years later, she found herself elected as Chairman of its Board. Her "day job" however, now revolves principally around the Inn.

"I'm proud to have built a business that I think, is gradually gaining notoriety and a reputation for the quality of its service and facilities," says Landry. "I find it very enjoyable to provide a pleasant experience for all our guests."

"Blessed with an incomparable flair and a sharp analytical mind, Francine has been able to draw on her business experience to realize her most cherished ambition—owning her own business." - Richard Bélanger, Manager of ACOA's Northwest District Office

Mashed, baked, or "croquettes"?

It's a question Deborah Childs would love to see become the new standard in the food-service industry.

An alternative to the traditional options for prepared potatoes, the croquette is a specialty perfected by Childs' parents, restaurant owners and caterers, who were determined to create and serve "something unique."

Inheriting her parents' entrepreneurial spirit, Deborah Childs, owner of Childs Foods in Saint John, New Brunswick, is using their recipe to fuel a business. She's passionate about her product and is committed to the hard work she knows it takes to see it succeed.

Growing up in the Childs' family meant growing up in the food service industry, explains Childs, one of five siblings. "We all helped out in one way or another," she says.

But, like most young adults, she decided she needed to break out on her own. "I wanted to try something else instead of being in the family business," she recalls with a laugh, "and now, I'm not only continuing my family's legacy with Childs Catering, I've started my own family business."

Childs Foods, the only company in the region producing the popular croquettes, was born from a belief in the family specialty and a drive to find its niche in the challenging world of frozen foods. Childs' confidence in the croquette stemmed from the years of success it had enjoyed in its fresh form. (After more than 18 years on sale at the local market, it is still in demand.)

"They are so easy for customers to prepare and it's something very unique," she explains. "Where else can you get a breaded, mashed potato? And it's made by hand so you know it's a good wholesome product."

The quality behind the croquettes from Childs Foods adds to their appeal, explains Karen Mason, a Sobeys' Deli manager in Saint John and long-term customer, who orders from 80-100 packages of the fresh croquettes each week.

"Childs is very dedicated and she has a great product. Our customers know how fresh it is," she says. "It's a high end product we'll want to have for years to come - in fresh and frozen."

Currently, Childs Foods produces about 3,000 croquettes daily. Although the gourmet food is doing well in deli sections of local stores, Childs was determined to see her market extend much farther. To do that, she

Building an Empire, One Croquette at a Time

By Carolyn Grey

explains, she had to determine a way to give the product a longer shelf life. That's when she decided to introduce a frozen croquette to her line of products.

With that decision came a whole new set of challenges. ACOA helped her with one of the biggest hurdles: financing for the venture. Through the Business Development Program (BDP), the Agency provided Childs with the additional capital she needed to make the transition into frozen foods. Research on temperature fluctuation, shipping, regulations and product modification ensued. According to Childs, ACOA was there along the way to help guide her to the experts she needed to get things in place.

As predicted, from the outset response to the new 3-oz frozen croquette has been good, so good in fact that Childs has had to learn to delegate - a departure from her hands-on approach to management - in order to properly run her growing operation.

"I wanted to try something else instead of being in the family business," she recalls with a laugh, "and now, I'm not only continuing my family's legacy with Childs Catering, I've started my own family business."

"At first it was difficult. I'm giving up part of my business to someone else," she recalls. "It's hard to let someone else take over but although it's really hard to admit, I'm only one person."

Recently, she has even hired a sales and marketing consultant to promote the croquettes to buyers one-on-one and at trade shows, a staple in Childs' marketing plan. The move is already paying off.

"He not only gets the buyer to agree to sell the product, but he shows them how we are going to promote it in their stores," she adds. "He's a huge support."

With this new approach, Childs Potato Croquettes may now be found in the frozen food section of more than 250 grocery stores across the region, including Sobeys Atlantic, Co-op Atlantic and Atlantic Wholesalers.

Childs believes this kind of success is just the beginning; but she is clear on the hard work that lies ahead to take the business to the next level.

The new challenge, she explains, is educating the consumer about the product. It's one she is again facing with the help of ACOA, which is supporting the company's growth through a BDP loan for marketing costs. Recognition from the Canadian Council of

Grocery Distributors, which recently bestowed the Childs Foods croquette with the Atlantic Regional Grand Prix New Product Award, is yet another leg up.

With new packaging boasting "2003 Grand Prix Winner" and the slogan "potatoes with pizzazz", Childs Foods Frozen Croquettes are now marketed in three flavors across the region with a fourth under development.

The company has also developed a smaller, 1-ounce croquette for the hors-d'oeuvre and children's "mini" market. The new format has already been introduced successfully to select hotels, restaurants, and institutional facilities and is opening up a host of new market possibilities.

"I have a huge vision for the future," says Childs, adding that she can see expanding west into Quebec and Ontario as well as exporting to the United States. "(But)...there's still a lot of work we can do right here in Atlantic Canada," she says.

When asked what advice she would give to other women in business, she reflects that having passion for the business and the product is essential, as is having a good advisor.

"You can't do it alone. If it wasn't for ACOA, I wouldn't be here," she says, explaining that, in addition to providing financial assistance at critical junctures in the company's growth, ACOA has been invaluable in helping her to keep abreast of programs and courses that have helped her to learn to better run her business.

"Now they have asked me to mentor other people starting in business," she says, referring to her new role as part of the Agency's mentorship program. "It's a nice compliment."

For Deborah Childs, marketing her award winning and expanding product line is essential. Here, she shows off three flavours of her company's "potatoes with pizzazz."



Riding High at Mountain Brook Stables

by Nadya Ladouceur

It all started in 1997 while looking for land to build a house. That's when Sonya Jalbert fell instantly in love with a farm near Charlo. Her childhood dream of owning a horse resurfaced, and her desire to own her own business took seed.

Now, just seven years later, Mountain Brook Stables, the business that sprung from that encounter, is home to 16 horses (seven of them boarders) and a thriving riding school for 85 students.

Seated on her veranda on a beautiful summer afternoon, Jalbert, the mother of two young children, describes the road she and Vincent, her husband and business partner, have travelled over these years. It's one characterized by passion, determination and community support.

The initial idea, she explains, was to have a few horses, offer horseback riding, pony rides at local fairs and give a few lessons. With a solid business plan and a Business Development Program (BDP) loan from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), Mountain Brook Stables was born.

The business quickly grew in reputation and popularity across the Restigouche-Chaleur region. In time, Jalbert and her husband found themselves with more boarders than expected, demand for trail rides that exceeded capacity and a student base well above all projections.

But, with growth came challenges. Eventually, the couple realized that the business could not expand while incurring the expenses of maintaining such a wide range of activities. At a crossroads, Jalbert admits that at one point, they actually considered abandoning it all. However, she says, that thought was short-lived.

"What kept me going were the kids," says Jalbert. "They didn't want me to shut down

and I couldn't give up on them," she explains, adding that she believes her own love of nature—sprung from her Aboriginal roots—has been passed on to her students. This, she says, is a great source of pride and an impetus to keep her going.

Jalbert then undertook the task of overhauling the business plan to make it viable. With this new, focussed approach, she abandoned the seasonal horseback rides in favour of enhancing her year-round riding lessons.

Last year, with existing facilities operating at full capacity, Jalbert again approached ACOA for help to take Mountain Brook to the next level. That's when she learned about the Agency's Women in Business Initiative (WBI) and met Sophie Boucher, the regional WBI Development Officer. Together, they identified the business' needs and the potential sources of financing that could meet them.

According to Jalbert, it was this meeting that enabled her to find financing available to young Aboriginal women under the Ulnooweg Fund and Aboriginal Business Canada. The result is a new indoor arena, currently under construction, which will be used for year-round Western and English-style riding lessons, advanced horse training and even children's parties. The new facility should be operational in November 2004.

In addition to being instrumental in obtaining the financing she needed, Jalbert credits Boucher and the WBI with helping her access programs that are improving her business management skills. Currently the entrepreneur is enrolled in a computerized accounting course, with flexible hours.

According to the entrepreneur, her passion for what she does has been invaluable in growing the business. However, she says, Mountain Brook Stables would not be where it

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is today without the support of a long list of family and members of the community. That list includes her husband, who oversees the farm; parents and in-laws, who are always ready to lend a hand; Jolene, a riding instructor, who returns faithfully each year to help her teach; and a number of parents and students who are always eager to pitch in with everything from shingling the roof to baling the hay.

Jalbert also counts on the help of a few young girls aged 12 to 16 who, in exchange for riding lessons, take care of the horses and the stable.

For Jalbert, student attachment to the stable and horses is a source of pride and joy. However, she says, her greatest reward is seeing them learn and succeed.

"When you are teaching a lesson and the kids actually get what you are trying to teach and enjoy their lesson, it's a big accomplishment."

Looking to the future, Jalbert sees herself taking her students to horse shows as well as continuing to provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve their own equine-related goals. She says she'd also like to pass on her passion for horses to her own young children, but admits that, at this point, they may perceive the animals and the stable as the reason they don't get to see their mom as often as they'd like.

With a schedule that begins at 7:00 a.m. and ends at 10:00 p.m., seven days a week, Jalbert readily admits that striking a balance between family and business is the most difficult part of being an entrepreneur.

But, when asked if it's worth it, she will quickly answer that she wouldn't trade places with anyone. More than a matter of money or prestige, being a businesswoman, she says, has enabled her to realize her potential.

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Thanks to Sonya Jalbert's passion and determination, Mountain Brook Stables has become a booming business. Pictured above, riding teachers, Sonya Jalbert and Jolène Dubé, with Maverick and Silver.

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