



### Background

Very few people start a business while in college. Even fewer still turn it into a successful after-college career. It's been 12 years since Naomi Neilson Howard got a "wild idea" during one of her college breaks traveling around Mexico. In the past decade she's gone from sourcing folk art in Central Mexico and selling it out of the trunk of her car to become the nation's leading producer of high-quality copper sinks and tubs. Today, Naomi heads up what has become one of the most exciting companies in the decorative plumbing business.

In an industry dominated by giant, global brands, Native Trails blazed a new path, ambling into artisan created, high-quality handcrafted decorative plumbing products. The cultural artifacts of Central Mexico had long ago captivated Naomi's attention on her frequent visits there with her family. On one such trip, an idea struck: buy a trunk load of folk art and sell it back home. Never mind that she was a student. No matter that she had no warehouse. Or sales team. Or banker. She did have a car (showroom) and some credit cards (line of credit). She also had plenty of passion, spunk and entrepreneurial drive. She wanted to share the functional art that had been produced for centuries in Central Mexico with others. And she did so with fervent zeal. The business was a roaring success, even while she completed her degree at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California.

If you ask any one of her 30 employees, they will say that Naomi is the kind of person who listens to all ideas and gives each significant consideration. In fact, she attributes her success to being surrounded by such creative and forward-thinking people. "Our artisans, our team in San Luis Obispo, our sales reps, our suppliers, our customers...every day I am reminded in many ways of what an outstanding group of people we have banded together. I can't take credit for our success. The only thing I can accept is that by searching out the most qualified people with whom to work, and by listening to their suggestions, ideas, criticisms, and by encouraging open communication, we seem to have cultivated an environment that inspires innovation."

It was just one of those suggestions proffered by her customers which changed the course of her business. She had a couple of requests to turn the copper bowls she was selling into lavatory sinks. Thinking this was an interesting idea, she worked with the artisans to create the first prototype and promptly toted it back to the States to show it to the owner of a nearby kitchen and bath showroom. The expert concurred that the piece had great potential. Many prototypes and several

shipments later, Naomi was well on the way to altering the entire focus of her business - from being a home accents purveyor to a producer of handmade copper sinks.

Say the words “copper sink,” and the immediate association today is Native Trails. Copper sinks are now the mainstay of the business; in just five years, the company has become the industry leader, with over 1100 showrooms in the U.S. and Canada. Native Trails copper sinks are a favorite of designers and architects, who appreciate the high-quality, handmade and environmental aspect of the product.

Coppersmithing hasn't changed much since the age of the Aztecs. Skilled coppersmiths, utilizing an open forge for heating and softening the metal, produce each sink using thousands of hammer strokes over an anvil to slowly form it into the desired shape. Multiply that out and you get a sense of the work that goes into a Native Trails bathtub.

The element may be as old as the hills, but in 21<sup>st</sup> century decorating, copper gives a very modern look. Part Zen. Part Country. Part contemporary. It's also very green, and not in the way you think. All Native Trails copper sinks, tubs and accents are made from recycled copper. Craftspeople in Central Mexico collect used electrical wire, pipes and construction copper and melt it to form sheets from which emerge some of the most beautiful kitchen and bathroom fixtures on the market.

The use of recycled copper suits the company's core intent to be socially and environmentally responsible. From day one, Naomi insisted that her company have a low impact on the planet. Native Trails introduced bathroom vanities that are made completely from reclaimed wood. It is a product attribute that resonates with many customers. She also believes that Native Trails has found an audience with those seeking something handmade for their homes in our very industrial world. The artistic quality of the copper sinks and tubs lends an undeniable note of warmth and luxury to any home. It's also a gesture of individuality - copper sparks that in an interior.

The kitchen and bath industry has noticed something else about Naomi: her prescience. After proving her initial hunch that copper sinks would become a star, she has been busy adding lots of brushed nickel to the Native Trails offering. The glimmer and shimmer of brushed nickel turns a sink into a jeweled centerpiece of a kitchen and a freestanding bathtub into an absolute sensation for a bathroom.

There are many copper sinks coming into the market these days; indeed where one leads, many others follow. The main differentiator for Native Trails, other than its category-defining designs, is the quality of its products, its use of recycled copper and its excellent customer service. The company ships 98% of product orders within 48 hours. Judging from the look of their product, who would want to wait any longer

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to behold these stunning decorative pieces? The Decorative Products & Hardware Association took notice of the company's fast rise and solid accomplishments by naming Naomi the Manufacturing Professional of the Year in 2005, when she was barely 30.

Native Trails also produces decorative tile in Central Mexico, both hand-hammered copper tiles as well as traditional Tavera tiles, hand-painted with vivid detail. Both lines are distributed nationally through tile showrooms.

In addition to industry recognition, Howard was bestowed another honor, this one in her hometown of San Luis Obispo, California. In January, 2009, she was named one of the area's top business leaders under the age of 40, recognized for both her company's accomplishments as well as her commitment to community service. She recently implemented a community service program called Community Trails to encourage employee volunteerism and contributions to local non-profits. "Native Trails has always been about making a positive contribution," says Howard. "We are not a big company, but we do want to make a big contribution to our community."

Native Trails got its name from Naomi's experiences searching out and working with native peoples in far-off places. She may always be searching for the next hot product, the next way to make a difference in her industry or community, but she is certainly no longer searching for success. On the other hand, she may be looking for a little time off. Naomi Neilson Howard is proof that a little time away from work – or study, as the case once was – can open up the mind to some very exciting possibilities.

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