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I MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR

NAOMI

NEILSON HOWARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS BERSBACH





In this installment of our “Meet Your Neighbor” series, *SLO LIFE Magazine* sits down for a conversation with Naomi Neilson Howard, the founder and CEO of Native Trails. She started the company out of a spare bedroom closet while attending Cal Poly where she studied social sciences. Today, Native Trails, which is most well known for its copper sinks that are handcrafted by artisans in Mexico, serves as a model for a new type of company and a new way of doing business. She lives in Shell Beach with her husband, Chris, and their young children Braylon and Ania. Here is her story...

Where are you from, Naomi?

I grew up in the Bay Area, San Jose. My parents divorced and they were both remarried, so I have had a lot of different influences in my life. My mom was an accountant, my dad was an engineer, my stepfather was a teacher from a small village in rural Mexico and my stepmother was an artist. My dad, he was a very careful businessperson. I mean, he would loan me money, but I had to pay him back with interest. It was good. He taught me to be cautious. My mom, she’s just always thinking about other people, just very in touch with others. She’s very empathetic and wanting to lift people up. She always had this amazing confidence in me for some reason. She told me recently that she always believed in me; she always knew I would do whatever I set my mind to. I didn’t think about that consciously until recently, but I always felt her confidence in me and I know that it had a big impact on my life. So, it’s interesting how the separation and remarriage of my parents was such a blessing for me. I ended up with four incredible parents who each taught me something different and incredibly valuable. >>

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What were you like as a kid?

I was very active. I always liked to be doing something. So, I guess not a lot has changed in that respect. I was always very social and I do remember, even in elementary school, I was always drawn to the kids that were being picked on. I always wanted to protect them. I had sort of an oddball crew of friends when I was a kid. I was always beating up the boys so they would leave my friends alone. [laughter] I'd say, "If you are going to pick on her, you're going to have to take me on!" I just thought I could conquer the world.

Tell us about your company. How did you start it?

I started Native Trails when I was still at Cal Poly, which was in '96. I graduated a year later. I was inspired by travels I had done with my family over the years to Mexico. My stepfather is from Central Mexico and we have lots of family on his side down there, so we'd always go visit. And my favorite places were always the village marketplaces. So I would just get lost there, and my family would have to drag me out. It's kind of still like that today, actually. You find all these artists and artisans there, creative people, and all sorts of people. I always love finding the people who make unique and beautiful things. Each person, each family had such unique stories. And it wasn't really being recognized or appreciated, so I thought, "Wow, I wish there was a way for me to bring that story and bring what they do to people who understand and appreciate it like I do."

What were those early days like?

I started very small, initially with just a spare closet in my house. I remember one of my first trips, there was this one woman in the marketplace and she was selling some kind of craft and she had only 50 or 100 pieces. I really liked what she had and so I told her that I'd like to buy all of them. And she said, "If I sell all of them to you today what will I sell tomorrow?" She made me leave her five pieces that she could sell the next day. [laughter] When I started, a lot of people still didn't have telephones or electricity either. There was one village that

had only one phone. So I would call, and they'd recognize my voice after a few times and I'd say, "This is Naomi and I need to talk to Tomasa." And they'd say, "Llama otra vez en diez minutos," [call back in 10 minutes]. Then they'd get on the loud speaker and yell out, "Tomasa Gonzales! Naomi le busca por telefono, ven a la caseta a esperar la llamada!" [come to the phone and wait for her call]. Then Tomasa would come, and I would call back and she would be there. There had been a lot of challenges like that. I remember once visiting this town called Ocumicho in Michoacan. It rained so hard that the river rose too high for us to cross, so we had to stay overnight. Not only were there no hotels, the homes had dirt floors and the beds were truly family beds shared by several people. One of our artist families gave us their bed and they braided our hair and told us stories of village folklore all evening. They had never had a foreign guest stay overnight so all the kids were pretty excited. Nobody got much sleep that night!

Where did the money come from to start Native Trails?

I had a little bit of money left over from student loans, and from working part-time, and credit cards. I sold my car once when I was down in Mexico and had run out of money. I called my roommate and asked if he would sell it for me. I said, "The pink slip is in the drawer and keys are on the dresser. I need 5,000 bucks." I had just enough money to make it home, but there was more that I wanted to buy. He sold the car and wired me the money. It was in my bank account a few days later and I was like, "Yeah! Alright!" I forget exactly what it was at the time, but I had found something that I thought had a lot of potential that I wanted to bring home. And I thought, "Ah, to come all this way and not be able to get it!" It wasn't like I could just send the people the money and have them ship it, because we weren't that sophisticated at the time. I needed to buy it right there and shove it in my van.

When did you realize that the business was starting to take off?

I was selling at craft shows and festivals in little booths trying to get a feel for what





Having fun at home with daughter, Ania, son, Braylon, and their golden retriever, Merlin.

people liked. And then I started selling to retail stores, gift stores, and boutiques. And before long things evolved, and I started going to gift shows where I would meet buyers from bigger companies; buyers from stores all over. A lot of my customers in the early days were from very high-end boutiques and museum gift stores like the Smithsonian; a lot of museums. Around the same time I had connected with some artisans who were working with copper. I had a thought that the copper might work well as a sink. So, I started designing copper sinks. I remember when the first shipment came in and I said to myself, "Wow, these are really cool. I wonder what people will think?" So, I took them to Pacific Coast Kitchen & Bath, just down the street, and introduced myself to Brian Metcalf, the owner there. I really lucked out because Brian has great vision. He's also very positive and encouraging. He bought everything I had with me at the time and he called me up a few days later and said, "Naomi, do you have anymore of those copper sinks? I sold everything you brought me. I need more. You really have something hot. This is a winner." He said, "I think you're going to go big with this." I just remember sort of going, "Yeah!"

Has your philosophy about the business evolved over time?

My inspiration for starting Native Trails was really all about the artisans, and it still is. That's really where my passion is. It's designing beautiful things using recycled materials and working with artisans who can create them by hand and put their whole heart and soul into their work. That's what I love. That's what makes me go every day. But, I've come to realize over the years that, in order for anyone's lives to be affected, we have to make a profit. We have to have a viable business. I realize the importance of every decision I make and how much of an impact it can have on people. And, it has; I have seen amazing things happen with the artisans we work with. Their lives have changed dramatically. Many families we work with started with just a little workshop behind their house and now they've got huge facilities where they have >>

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Client Feedback

"After speaking with and investigating several agents as we considered selling our rental property, we decided on Amy Daane with Haven Properties. Her expertise seemed apparent, her outlined approach seemed right and in agreement with our ideas, and, most of all, her warm, eager and friendly personality was most appealing. She started working that minute and put forth 101% effort until the job was done - less than a month later. She handled every detail of preparing the place for sale, and we had an offer the night before the agent's open house. We accepted, and we closed by Friday - four days later! We could not have been more satisfied. Thank you Amy."

- Norine and Del Fernandez

Contact:
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maybe a hundred people recycling copper and crafting products. It usually starts off as a family, then it grows to the point where it can support the whole village. It's really a beautiful thing. The impact we have is pretty powerful. But you can really see that, if we trip up here and our business slows down, then suddenly people there don't have work. It really makes a difference in people's lives.

What do the artisans think of all this?

Sometimes we bring them here to show them their products displayed at a high-end retailer with the lighting in a beautiful showroom along with our bath furniture. That's when it really clicks, and they say, "Wow, that's why you're so particular about quality and detail and finish." They really understand. And, it also makes them feel really good. It makes them feel happy that people appreciate their work. This was my dream from way back when I used to go to those village marketplaces. I used to dream about taking their techniques and bringing them to a market where they could really be appreciated. Well, when they come and see their work in a showroom, it's a dream come true for me. When they come here and they're just like, "Wow! This is amazing!" They take pictures for everyone back home and they just feel so good. We are always trying to find ways that we can grow with the artisan families that we work with. We support each other.

Speaking of families, tell us about your own.

We have a three-year-old girl, Ania, and a five-year-old boy, Braylon, who is in kindergarten. I couldn't have had a family in the early days, there was just no way that I would have been able to make either function properly. Native Trails needed my full attention because it was like my big, huge baby for many years, twenty-four seven. There was no room in my life for anyone else. When I met my husband, Chris, about ten years ago, which was about seven years into the business, I was at the right point in my life. I really needed some balance. And, I had the business to a point where I did not have to be so intimately involved in every single function. I had managers and I had a great team of people. I was growing things to a different level. That was good because Chris is a psychologist and he is an expert in work-life balance. So, he was a really good influence on me. He inspired me. I wanted to spend time away from the business. He arrived at the right time; if it was any earlier I wouldn't have been able to make time. He came into my life right when I needed him.

How has starting a family impacted your business?

Every time something major in my life happened, the business transformed. With my son, a friend of mine called it "The Braylon Effect." I came through this

huge transformation where I really grew my management team. It's hard for an entrepreneur to let go when you're used to doing so much of it yourself. To actually let go and pass off responsibility, it's a big step to take. But having a baby, of course, really made it worthwhile. So, having my son had a profound impact on the company. Then, two years later when Ania came, it was the next evolution. I have an amazing team. I'm able to be a mom, too. Like, I'm not going back to work after our visit today. I'm done for the day. I'm going to go run errands. Of course, I'm far from done. I've got to pick up some things for the kids. And I've got to do a whole bunch of other random home maintenance things.

Before we let you go, Naomi, can you share some advice for new entrepreneurs?

Find your passion. Find something that you just care so deeply about, something that you are willing to make sacrifices for. If you are going to start your own business, it requires a lot of sacrifice. But, if you love what you do, it doesn't feel like a painful sacrifice; it's a sacrifice that you love to make. So, I think that's an important place to start. And, then, just don't give up, because it's so easy to give up. So many obstacles will come your way. There are always challenges. And, sometimes you will say, "I'm at a dead end." But, there's always a way to keep going. So, if you kind of have it in your head that failure is not an option, then failure isn't an option. There may come a point where it's time to change paths, to look at things and do things a little bit differently, but for me "failure" was not a word that I ever used. It was just not in my vocabulary. And I should have probably failed like ten times along the way, and I think that probably every entrepreneur has that same story. There are so many ways we can fail, but you can't look at it that way. I think you always have to look for lessons—instead of looking at something as a failure, look for the lesson. There are lessons everyday that are so valuable. Sometimes the biggest challenges and setbacks are the things we grow from the most. **SLO LIFE**



BEHIND *the scenes*

with Chris Bersbach

As a general rule, most people do not like having their picture taken. The same goes for me. I had my photo taken recently and, through no fault at all of the photographer, I was super uncomfortable. It was just a weird situation. About halfway through our session with Naomi, her kids arrived home from school. And, from that point on, you can really see the difference in the quality of her smile. The first half of the shots show someone who is politely smiling for this guy who has a big hunk of lens in her face, while the second half of the shots after the kids arrived are much more warm and genuine. In fact, in the cover photo we chose, Naomi's daughter was tugging on her shirt, which caused her to twist to the left and give us a bit of a sideways look with a pure expression of love and joy.



We had been talking a lot over the last few months about how cool it would be to do a cover in black and white. And, since Naomi has such a classic, timeless look I thought that she would be the perfect candidate for this technique. To prepare, I spent some time looking at old black and whites of famous actresses to get a better sense for appropriate lighting and posing. I did plan to shoot both digital and film, but had a feeling that film, so long as I could get the right shot, would be the clear winner, which it was.



Film *versus* Digital

I love film not because it is inherently better than digital, but because the size of the camera sensor is so much larger on my equipment. The size of the sensor dictates the amount of light and information the camera can record, and with my film camera I am able to get a much larger exposure compared to my digital equipment. Although there are trade-offs; the film equipment is bigger and clunkier, plus you have to develop the negatives.



172

Total number of frames made during our session with my two digital cameras (a Fuji X-Pro1 and a Fuji X100) and the film I shot on the Hasselblad.