

'I can't work for someone else again'

Grande Prairie has an emerging group of female small business owners

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She had to know if she could do it, and now she'll never go back. That's how Nicole Baker describes what it was like for her five years ago when she took the plunge and decided to start her own small business.

Alberta's second major oil boom was just beginning with little clue of what lay ahead and Baker was embarking into a niche industry that had historically been more male-dominated and she had never run her own business before.

"Part of me had to know if I could do it," she said.

Today, Baker is sitting in her own office and her company Digital Blues is about to expand and move to a new location for the second time in less than two years. She's about to celebrate five years in business running her own website design and computer technical assistance company. She employs seven other people and would hire more if she could find more website designers.



Nicole Baker, owner of digital-blues.com, a computer and technology consulting firm based in Grande Prairie, is proud of her company's rapid expansion and success in the Peace Country. As a woman entrepreneur in the IT field, Baker fixes everything from modems (pictured) to hardware as well as designs webpages.

Photo: Olivia Kachman

"I was bored at my old job. Starting your own business gets rid of that fairly fast," said Baker with a laugh.

National Small Business Week wraps up today. Each year the week is held as a celebration of one of the most powerful economic forces in this country – small businesses. In Canada they account for roughly one-quarter of the national gross domestic product and in Alberta, land of the massive oil and gas companies, small businesses also account for about 25 per cent of GDP.

Here in Grande Prairie the number of small businesses vastly outnumbers the Canfors and EnCanas of the resource sector. All this week, events have been held in the city to promote small businesses and today a special seminar is being held to promote women in business in the city.

The number of female entrepreneurs has been growing every year in Canada and in Grande Prairie there is a vibrant and diverse group of businesswomen who own and run their own companies.

Patty Samson and Kristina MacNeil had been working as teachers at St. Joseph Catholic school, but kept feeling the pull of private business. The two women had taught hairstyling and esthetics at the school but saw what they felt was a void in the local marketplace and in January 2006 started a new downtown hair salon they dubbed Pink Rain.

QUIT THEIR OTHER JOBS

At first they thought they would keep their jobs and hire staff to work at the salon by day and they would be there at nights. Since opening the doors, however, business has taken off at the nearly double the rate of their business plan and they quit their teaching posts at the end of the last school year. Pink Rain was nominated as one of the city's best new businesses in their year's Small Business Awards earlier this week.

"I think the biggest thing for women is they lack confidence," said Samson. "We'd like to see more women opening their own businesses."

Going from the classroom to management office wasn't an easy step for the duo. With no formal business training they turned to economic development agency Community Futures for advice. With a little guidance,

their four-page business plan became a 69-page small novel.

They secured some start-up funding and after less than two years in business are already contemplating expansion with a second location either in Grande Prairie, Fort St. John or a larger market such as Edmonton. They've found success in a tight labour market by turning to their former students, offering local high school grads a chance to get into the business and sending them to more advanced training courses.

"The younger girls are eager. They work as a team and they're highly trained," said Samson.

Holly Sorgen, the executive director of Community Futures, says the experience of Samson and MacNeil is fairly common – women taking a talent they already have and trying to take it to the next level.

Since April 1 of this year Community Futures has given out \$550,000 in small business loans and leveraged an additional \$500,000 in funding for start-up businesses, helping about 150 people who have come in the doors.

"I've been seeing more women," said Sorgen. "A lot are coming in not looking for lots of money, but for guidance."

Sorgen said women more than men tend to start small with their businesses such as creating home-based businesses or working at the Farmers Market.

"They're the tried-and-true type businesses ... but we have the women who have bought a plasma torch as well," she said.

COUPLES IN BUSINESS, TOO

In addition to seeing more women in business, Sorgen said a more common trend is for couples to start a business together as equal partners.

Shawna Miller and her husband Jason are a Grande Prairie example of that trend. The couple owns and operates Smith Co. Enterprises, the holding company behind numerous businesses. The duo owns 10 Subway Restaurants, including all five in Grande Prairie along with the city's two Taco Time outlets. They started seven years ago by buying the city's first three Subway outlets.

Miller has a business degree that began with classes at Grande Prairie Regional College and her husband has an education degree. Education has been an important part of their success, she said.

"It may seem obscure at the time, but any knowledge can help," she said. "There's a lot of things that will come out of the woodwork that can be crippling."

In the fast-food business, staffing can be a challenge at the best of times, but in a labour shortage it can be a nightmare. They have coped by accessing the temporary foreign worker program.

"We built a really good team. One thing we learned early on was the value of good management," she said. "We both have good gut feelings and tend to follow them."

Baker began studying for a business degree in New Brunswick, not far from her native Nova Scotia, but found her calling in the computer industry instead. She has made up for a lack of formal training by developing a strong network of friends in the business community, becoming heavily involved in Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce.

"Nothing teaches you like reality," she said.

Baker has learned the value of hiring employees to compensate for business areas she doesn't specialize in – in her case Baker hired a controller to manage her payroll and accounting – allowing her time to focus on the core business.

"It's a constant learning thing," she said of being her own boss. "I've learned I can't work for someone else again."