



Left – A wintry scene in Jubilee Park, just outside Grande Prairie's provincial and court house buildings.

Below – Digital Blues owner Nicole Baker has turned Grande Prairie's success into her own success. Recently, she won the local chamber of commerce's Business of the Year award for companies with under 10 employees.

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it is the best place to do it and it's the best time. If you want to work hard and get out there, then there is definitely money to be made."

Nicole Baker knows that first-hand. She is one of the new business people to the city who have found their niche and achieved success in a very short time.

Having started her technology and website design company, Digital Blues, in February 2003, it has grown beyond being just a local technical support company and has built a growing international client base. The Chamber of Commerce recently recognized the company as Business of the Year for companies under 10 employees.

It has taken a lot of hard work to get the successes Digital Blues has had, but Baker gives some of that credit to being in Grande Prairie.

"It's pretty incredible here. I always say there is enough work for everyone out there," says Baker, whose company now handles 120 local and international websites and boasts well over 300 clients.

When she started, it was just her and her business partner (who she bought out last year). Three months later they had to hire a web designer, then three months after that they had to hire a technician. Today, there are six employees, hopefully a seventh in the new year, and a host of subcontractors.

Their growth has surprised Baker, who never even expected to turn a profit in the first year.

"You read all these marketing books and all these sales books before you start your business and they say to expect 10 per cent growth in revenue to start. Well there hasn't been a year where we haven't doubled the revenues. It's pretty amazing. I just checked last week and we're already double over the same period last year for revenues."

It's the similar story over at Donovan Mills, a kitchen construction/renovation company that is getting a lot of attention from builders and homeowners in Grande Prairie. Sarsly Donovan and her husband, Kevin, also started their company in 2003 after the opportunity came up to do something they loved – designing kitchens. In their first year they lacked out when a builder took a chance on them and they built 42 kitchens that year when their goal was a modest 20. This year, they will do well over 300 kitchens. Sarsly knows they were



fortunate they started when they did – at the beginning of a housing boom that is sending construction to record levels year after year.

"We could not have predicted what was going to happen in the construction industry. There were no predictions, I was just following my dream."

But that's not to say that it has been easy. The Donovans have had to take extra care that they have their business plan in good order. They could take on more work, but that would mean rushing the jobs and they might lose the glowing reputation they have worked hard to build. In some cases, the work will turn away jobs if they can't handle the volume. You have to be able to take growth slowly and plan for it, says Sarsly.

"Just because it's a boom it doesn't mean that it's all gravy. It isn't. It's still a lot of hard work and you have to keep your reputation, and that's a lot more important than getting volume. If you're a start-up company, volume doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be successful. If you don't plan to be able to handle it, then it's all for naught because you'll end up losing money."

Even for companies that have long established themselves in this community, for all the work that is available in Grande Prairie it can still be a tough place if you're not prepared for how hot the economy is.

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Sarsly and Kevin Donovan followed their dreams and set up a kitchen renovation shop in Grande Prairie. In just a few short years they have gone from 42 kitchens annually to over 300.