



Art of Glass

On a nippy mid-November morning, Brenda Doucette looks at herself in a mirror. It's 5:45 a.m. and pitch black outside—a colour that matches her mood. She's at Boston's Fairmont Copley Plaza Hotel, “a bastion of sophistication and elegance since 1912.” In spite of sleeping on a mattress that likely cost more than the contents of her entire bedroom back in Yarmouth, she does not feel rested. For the umpteenth time since her feet hit the ground she thinks, what am I doing here?

Doucette and 14 other women had flown in from Halifax the day before, Atlantic Canada's first all-women trade mission to the United States. Doucette's goal? To round up \$40,000 worth of orders for stained glass gift items. Although she'd been in business for less than two years, Acadian Glass Art was a going concern. This in spite of the fact that she operated out of a storefront so small you could swing a cat by the tail and touch all walls.

Doucette looks in the mirror, readying to put the finishing touches on her makeup. At home, she usually doesn't bother. But third-degree burns incurred at three years of age (the result of a mishap with an oil

can and an outdoor fire) have left deep, dark scars along the contours of her face and neck. For the task at hand, makeup's in order. *This could be my funeral.* She's careful not to get any foundation on the black suit she is wearing.

Over breakfast, the 36-year-old goes over the three-day itinerary. Seven appointments; seven unknowns. *I really shouldn't be here.* Toying with her scrambled eggs, she wonders how on earth she'll manage to fill more orders, even if she gets them. She's already doing double time the better part of seven days a week. *What am I doing here?*

Doucette's passion for stained glass started in the summer of 1994 in Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia. A boyfriend twisted her arm to take a weekend workshop. She grudgingly agreed, and was smitten from the get-go (with the stained glass, not the boyfriend). Looking at the small blue lighthouse she created, the single mom had a sense of hope and well being she hadn't experienced for a long time.

A few days later, Doucette read a notice at the local co-op food store: “Stained glass

for sale.” She visited a white-haired senior who wanted to sell all her tools and glass; Brenda asked for \$350 dollars worth. The woman agreed and promised to deliver the goods that evening. True to her word, she showed up at the appointed time. However, she didn't give Doucette \$350 worth. It was more like \$3,500 worth and wouldn't take “no” for an answer. Her benefactor simply said, “Do it with heart and kindness. Put your heart into it.”

Childhood had been tough for Brenda, especially after falling into the fire. The seventh of eight children, Doucette's dad taught her how to cut wood, paint and wield a hammer. But she never fit in. She hated school and house rules. Three days after her 16th birthday she skipped town. By the time the feisty brunette was 18, she had two children. As the years passed, Doucette worked like a crazy woman to get ahead financially, often juggling two or three jobs at once.

Receiving that incredible gift of tools and glass gave Doucette a new lease on life. She moved back to Yarmouth, enrolled her second son in school and started to work with glass. Along with her



For Brenda Doucette, making stained glass art was a hobby she yearned to turn into a full-time career. Through perseverance, serendipity and government support, her dream has finally become reality.

job at the grocery store, she threw network marketing into the mix, hawking everything from natural foods to water filtration systems. And she kept on making glass, dreaming of the day she'd have her own business. She saved. She did shifts at Tim Horton's and unloaded groceries at Sobey's. She sold suncatchers to service stations and corner stores. And saved some more.

Ten years went by. On one of her trips to Acadian Glass Art, (a supplier of stained glass materials and finished products located outside of Yarmouth), Doucette heard that the owner wanted to sell. It was the opportunity she had been searching for. Doucette extracted a promise from the owner to hold the business until she could top up the funds to buy it.

Doucette moved the business to her home in January, 2004. Although it came with some standing orders for gift shops in

Atlantic Canada, she needed help to increase her inventory of glass and materials before she could fill them. Around the same time, someone came to her home asking to buy some items. "Whoa," she thought. "I should have a store." Enter CBDC (Community Business Development Corporation) who helped her prepare a business plan and loaned her some money to set up a retail shop and forge ahead with her wholesale orders.

Requests for commissioned pieces started to roll in. Doucette added stained glass classes to her business mix. The tiny 280-sq. ft. shop hummed and hopped. The notion of expanding crossed her mind, but she had cold feet. Then a representative for the Women in Business Initiative (WBI) program dropped by one day. Would Doucette be interested in going the U.S. for an ACOA-sponsored trade show? "Thanks, but no," was the reply.

Another trade show popped into view and another invite. As she again declined, Doucette started to realize that her reluctance to venture across the border was based on fear of success. "If I wanted to grow, I had to step out of the box."

Yet nothing prepared her for the bouts of doubt the morning of November 15. Her assigned limo (and driver, Franky) showed up at 7:00 a.m. sharp. She liked him right away and en route to her first appointment in Cape Cod she confided, "What if I get some orders and can't fill them? What am I doing here?" He said, "You gotta stop thinkin' Canadian. Start thinkin' American." She laughed, but it was a surface laugh.

Two hours later, facing a potential client, the 5 ft. 4 in. businesswoman felt a shift, the same kind of mental readiness she feels when she steps up to the mound in a slow-pitch softball game. (Doucette's such a good pitcher that she once pitched in a men's tournament.)

She said to herself: "I'm here to sell you something and you are going to buy it. I'm going to make it so good for you that you will want to buy what I have ... and I'm not leaving until you do." By the second day of the trade mission, Doucette had exceeded her goals and cancelled the remaining four appointments.

The real highlight came when she asked Franky to swing by Harvard University. No one had encouraged her to study when she was young and as a child she often felt stupid. "I was all dressed up, and when I walked up the street to that library-I almost felt smart. I felt like I just belonged."

Postscript: When Doucette returned from the trade mission, she signed up for ACOA's Consultant Advisory Service and ended up with a business plan designed to increase her sales 500 per cent. Then she moved to a prime downtown location with 1,800 square feet and signed a contract with HRDC to hire and train staff. Retail sales have already increased by 30 per cent and orders are starting to stream in from the United States. •

Road Trip

IN 2005, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), in partnership with Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters (CME), developed the Women Exporter's Initiative (WEI) to increase export awareness and capabilities among Atlantic women entrepreneurs.

Fifteen companies and organizations took

part, representing interests in a wide range of products and services including art, textiles, food products, consulting services and book publishing. Each business invested \$1,000 and spent time training and completing a business diagnostic before taking part in the three-day trade mission.

Janice Goguen, Senior Trade Officer with ACOA (Moncton) accompanied the delegation.

For some time, her department had noticed how women business owners were under-represented at trade missions, hence the WEI initiative. "It was very successful. About half made sales on the spot, and the rest are counting on sales in the near future," she says. Collectively, sales totaled a quarter of a million dollars and are growing. A similar program is planned early in 2007.