

'INDIAN- PRENEURS' NATIVE BUSINESSES RISING

BY LIZ HILL (OJIBWE)

No one would disagree that the past few years have been challenging for all businesses, including Native businesses. Even Indian gaming, a mainstay of many tribal economies for the past 20 years, experienced the effects of a sour economy. However, during these dark economic days, Native businesses have continued to hold their own.

In July 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau released this news: "Number of Minority-Owned Businesses Soars." The bureau reported that between 2002 and 2007, the number of minority-owned businesses in the United States increased by 45.6 percent to 5.8 million, which was more than twice the national rate of increase of all U.S. businesses. The increase for American Indian- and Alaska Native-owned businesses was similarly impressive: 17.9 percent, for a total of 237,386 businesses. (*Native Peoples* reported an estimated total of more than 200,000 Indian businesses in its March/April 2009 issue.)

Minority businesses also are making a lot of money. The Census Bureau reported an increase in minority-owned business receipts of 55.6 percent to \$1.0 trillion between 2002 and 2007. American Indian and Alaska Native business receipts rose by 28.3 percent, for a total of \$34.5 billion.

Although it will be interesting to see statistics after 2007, when the economy started its free-fall, it is clear that in 2011 Native-owned businesses are doing something right. In each of the dozen profiles that follow (11 U.S. Native-owned companies and one non-Native-owned company in Canada with a uniquely Native-designed product and appeal), a few things become clear. First, Native businesses are aggressively forging ahead, despite the economy and against the odds. A firm commitment to product and customer service is key to the success that many companies are experiencing. A commitment to employees also is important. Employees are viewed almost like an extended family—and often they are, since many Native-owned companies are committed to hiring people from their own families and communities. Most important, these companies also give back to their communities. For all of them, the act of giving is as important as receiving.

Native ingenuity and success in every area, from agriculture, the arts and science to medicine, business and trade, have been flourishing for thousands of years in the Western Hemisphere among Native peoples. Leaders have come and gone. Economies have boomed and lagged. Native peoples have survived all of the vicissitudes of time. In 2011, Native commerce is as alive and well it has ever been.

LOOKING GOOD!

AYA for Claudia Alan, Inc.
Vancouver, British Columbia
www.claudiaalan.com

Native America loves AYA eyewear! These elegant eyeglass frames have been seen gracing faces in Indian Country, and well beyond, since their debut in 2009. Who is behind these bold and beautiful fashion statements? Carla D'Angelo is the owner of Claudia Alan, Inc., a company that she started in 2003 with a mission "to produce beautiful products that make a difference." AYA has taken beautiful First Nations art and incorporated it into eyewear, says D'Angelo.

Corrine Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw/Tlingit) is AYA's designer. She co-designed the medals for the 2010 Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Games. "Carla's ideas were fresh and she had a great respect for First Nations cultures—I liked the idea of bringing something new and applying it to something so practical and visible," says Hunt. "I think almost immediately people refer to the culture but also see this very modern look, and that's what really struck me."

"We have doubled our sales and exceeded all of the sales goals that we set," says D'Angelo.

Not originally knowing how broad the market would be for AYA, D'Angelo is thrilled that distribution has now extended to Australia, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Partial proceeds from the sale of AYA eyewear and accessories are going to ONEXONE First Nations nutritious breakfast programs. ONEXONE is a nonprofit foundation committed to supporting, preserving and improving the lives of children at home in Canada, the United States and around the world. "There are no boundaries for appreciation of this art form and for sunglasses and eyewear—everyone has fun with them," says D'Angelo.

