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North Shore Outlook

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It would be fair to say that Carla D'Angelo is a woman with a vision.

The North Vancouver entrepreneur, and founder of the successful eyewear company Claudia Alan, has long had her eye on creating stylish products that also raise money for worthy causes. For D'Angelo, life is an ongoing balancing act between the need to make a living and her drive to make a difference.

Sitting in a busy coffee shop in downtown Dunderave, D'Angelo's eyes light up as she describes her company's newest line of eyewear, AYA, which prominently features First Nations artwork on the arms. The stunning art – with designs inspired by eagles, wolves, ravens and hummingbirds – is created by world-renowned First Nations artist Corrine Hunt, one of two artists commissioned to design the 2010 Olympic medals.

"I've always had a love of First Nations art, so the idea behind this collection was to create something fashionable that showcases the artwork, but that also gives something back to the First Nations community," says D'Angelo emphatically.

And give back it does.

For every pair of AYA eyewear sold \$2 is donated to the ONEXONE First Nations Nutritious Breakfast Program, an initiative that currently provides breakfast for more than 1,500 First Nations students every school day. D'Angelo has also pledged to donate \$1 from the sale of eyewear accessory items, including cases and cleaning cloths, to the breakfast program.

To date, Claudia Alan has raised \$30,000 for First Nations students, and that figure continues to swell.

But this isn't the first time that D'Angelo has mixed charity with her business endeavours. Back in 2007 her company made national headlines after introducing its pink ribbon readers and sunglasses – an eyewear line sporting the famous pink ribbon for breast cancer research. That initiative netted approximately \$10,000 for the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation.

D'Angelo says she first dreamt up the idea of starting her own company while taking a break from her career in marketing and promotions in 2003. At the time, D'Angelo and her husband were living in St. Louis, Missouri, and they had just welcomed their daughter, Chloe, into the world.

"For the first time I had the luxury of being able to sit back and think 'What is my passion? What would I love to do?'" she recalls.

The end result was the creation of Claudia Alan Inc., a company that would combine her love of fashion (she studied fashion at Ryerson in Toronto), eyewear (she's the former vice president of the North Shore company Suntech Optics), and First Nations art (her parents were avid collectors of Aboriginal artwork in Australia).

Now living back in North Vancouver with her husband and two children, D'Angelo says she is grateful that she was able

to forge her own path, and urges other women to consider merging their own interests into a business plan.

“There’s a lot of opportunities and support systems for female business owners right now,” says D’Angelo, an active member of the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs. “So long as you’re comfortable in asking, help is always there.”

As for what’s next for D’Angelo, she says her focus has shifted to finding a distributor for the AYA optical line, which will officially launch in the fall. But regardless of what the future has in store, D’Angelo promises she won’t ever lose sight of her top priority – striving to have an impact on the lives of others.

“At the end of the day what’s important to me is family, health, and making a difference,” she says. “Life is short and I don’t want to look back and think maybe I could have made a difference.”

–For more info on Claudia Alan’s First Nations inspired eyewear visit www.claudiaalan.com