



Local woman carves out niche business

BY ANNE QUINN 12-29-06

Entrepreneur Martha Van Inwegen, president of Life Elements, slips this question into every conversation: “Do you know Oprah?” Meeting Oprah Winfrey is one of Van Inwegen’s goals and, while it may seem overly ambitious to those who don’t know her, the Atascadero resident has met and surpassed numerous other incredibly ambitious goals since starting her company Life Elements.

“You never know, someday I will meet someone who does know Oprah,” said Van Inwegen. “What if I didn’t ask?” The irony is, Van Inwegen is just the sort of person that Oprah would like to know.

In a year and a half, she invented a completely new, niche product for couples that is sold in luxury spa resorts as exclusive as the Ritz Carlton in Florida, Sea Ranch on the Sonoma-Mendocino area of the California Coast and she’s now talking to Trump International. To reach this goal, the first of many, she had to teach herself about packaging, presentation, sales, marketing, focus groups, market research, manufacturing, import/export, warehousing, trade shows, business plans and bottom lines, and, she did it all for love.

In June, 2005, Van Inwegen was a busy technology executive in love with an equally busy technology executive. The pair spent 75 percent of their time traveling in different directions, their lives dissected by airline schedules. When Curt and Martha could snatch time together, drop their public personas and relax, it was sometimes hard to reclaim intimacy.

“When we came back at the end of the week as a couple and had to re-bond, it was hard to do,” said Martha Van Inwegen. “We wanted to recreate a spa environment, draw a bath and enjoy it together but all the products on the market were girlie products, or they were oily and greasy.”

The discrepant lifestyle ended abruptly when Martha called Curt from the airport on her cell phone and told him she'd just quit her job. "He asked me, 'What are you going to do now?'" she said. "I told him I didn't know."

It wasn't long before she had her answer. "I thought, I'm going to go create this product that we've been looking for," Martha Van Inwegen said.

She gave herself a year to learn the industry. She set out to learn all about aromatherapy, a centuries old healing art using scents, with the goal of creating a product that was formulated with all natural ingredients and essential oils. She wanted to create a fragrance that is not masculine or feminine but pleasing to both.

The name of the product she eventually created, C&M Couples, stands for Curt and Martha. A marketing slogan on its website, www.lifeelements.com, sums up her approach: "Some relationships benefit from therapy, all relationships benefit from aromatherapy."

Having developed a tasteful all-natural product for couples, Van Inwegen began searching for a graphic designer and copywriter who could help her communicate that C&M Couples is a tasteful, elegant, smart and witty product.

She also had to learn about manufacturing. She quickly realized that she was paying big money to American companies for the tiny elegant bottles that are packaged in trendy silver aluminum lunch boxes with the C&M Couples logo, but the American companies were simply turning around sourcing these from China. "I thought, 'I'll just import from China directly,'" she said. She took a 10-week International Trade Course through the San Luis Obispo Economic Vitality Corporation. The EVC also put her in touch with SCORE and she learned how to write a business plan and obtain financing.

Not every thing she does is geared to making a profit. Van Inwegen has a contract with Achievement House so that developmentally disabled clients assemble her trendy couples kits. It costs her more to do it this way, but she thinks helping people should be a part of what she does.

She also took public speaking classes. "I intend to be on Oprah," Van Inwegen said. Today C&M Couples sets are placed as complimentary gifts in the honeymoon suite at the Ritz Carlton and for couples who book Romantic Getaway packages at Sea Ranch with a note that the entire Life Elements couples line is available in the gift shop. How Van Inwegen got her products there is a story in itself.

After only a year she had a business plan, financing and an entire product line, just no customers. Locally she sold her product through her hairdresser, Marilyn Sullivan, at the Anderson Page Salon in Paso Robles.

She attended the lavish gift show in Los Angeles, where buyers for high-end stores view the newest gifts and place orders, but it wasn't the right venue for C&M Couples. Rather

than write the trip off as a loss, Van Inwegen created a spontaneous marketing research focus group out of the show's 10,000 participants.

Her next selection was the International Spa Expo. Its more targeted focus paid off. "I was the only one at the International Spa Expo catering to the couples market and that's what spas are looking for now," Van Inwegen said. "They are placing new emphasis on couples, offering couples getaway packages and building more couples rooms, because couples are going to spas more and more now to reconnect. Spas are looking for a tasteful product that they can offer without being offensive."

Life Elements is generating a lot of interest in major resorts now. Van Inwegen is talking to Trump International, and may even place C&M Couples products in Marbella, Oprah's favorite. "She goes there in April," Van Inwegen said. "I'm so excited."

After C&M Couples is fully launched, Van Inwegen wants to develop other products such as spa products women can use when they take time out to be with girl friends and healing products for skin that can help difficult conditions such as the one her mother had when she was tragically burned by radiology as a cancer patient. These are all "life elements," that Van Inwegen plans to develop and all of her ideas begin with love.