



BY COOPER LANGFORD

FROM THE GROUND UP

Bev Gray is more than a successful Whitehorse entrepreneur. She's taken a lifelong passion for wild plants and created a brand that's reaching across national and international borders.

If you walk along Main Street in Whitehorse, heading west out of the downtown core, you'll soon come across a small shop called Aroma Borealis. Owned by Bev Gray, a certified herbalist and aroma therapist, it specializes in natural body care and aromatherapy products—developed by Gray and inspired by the native plants of the boreal forest.

From all appearances, the store looks like a comfortable local business, and that is certainly true. But there's more to Aroma Borealis than first impressions might suggest. Despite its modest environs—and what many from outside the North might consider remote location—this 20-year old company has developed a devoted customer base that reaches across Canada, the United States and Europe. And as the business has grown, so has Gray's reputation as a herbalist, speaker and best-selling author—so much that Martha Stewart featured Gray's work on U.S. network television.

It's a surprising story, something Gray will acknowledge herself. "Those first years, you're just trying to make it," she says. "The first day I opened the store, I made \$200. It was all my friends coming in. I didn't want to take their money." But it's an important story too, one that serves as a case study of how a small Northern business can develop a national—even international—profile while staying close to home.

The Aroma Borealis story begins in the mid-1990s as a home-based business, with Gray selling a modest product line of teas, salves and balms at craft fairs and through a handful of local stores. Revenues were sporadic, so Gray supplemented her income with freelance journalism, a line of work that had originally brought her North a few years earlier. She took Aroma Borealis full-time in 1997 when she moved her business to the store that remains its headquarters. That's when the company's profile began to grow.

Although Gray kept a sharp focus on her local market, she also began to branch out into wholesaling, first to local businesses then to connections she made through her personal network. "I started locally, then friends of friends," she says. "That's how it grew." The description may sound modest, but step-by-step, Gray's business was growing a reputation and a client base beyond Yukon's borders. What was arguably the major turning point for Aroma Borealis came in 2004, when the business was chosen for an innovators program funded by the National Research Council. The program gave Gray the opportunity to work with an expert advisory board that helped her scale her strategy, marketing and e-commerce capabilities for national and international markets. "That was when I started

Branching Out: Bev Gray built her Aroma Borealis brand step-by-step, focusing on her personal networks and fostering new ones, raising her industry profile and, ultimately, remaining loyal to her Northern roots.

