

north shore news

Edgemont Village a bastion of women business owners

58 of 72 businesses in North Vancouver retail community are owned by women

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Marlene Tate (middle), the owner of Trims Seasonal Home Decor in Edgemont Village in North Vancouver is joined by daughters Morgan Buckle (left) and Dana Tate. Photo Jenelle Schneider, SUN

There is a tiny three-block retail community in North Vancouver, Edgemont Village, where 80 per cent of the business owners are women.

"We run the village as mothers, basically," said Marlene Tate, owner of Trims, a high-end artificial flower store that has been in the Village for 26 years.

"Every woman who owns a business runs it as if it's her home," Tate said. "All the women get together and figure out how to make the Village safe. We put money toward traffic safety and crossing guards."

Of the 72 small businesses in Edgemont Village selling goods and services, 58 are owned by women, according to Tate, who was inspired to count the ratio of male to female owners this fall. The businesses include beauty salons, dentists, an animal hospital, a bookstore, an optical shop and fashion store, among others.

By contrast, overall Canadian business ownership is 20 per cent female, 70 per cent male, and 10 per cent jointly owned, according to Industry Canada figures from 2010.

Tate said the impact of such a high percentage of women owners is hard to quantify, but the female influence shows in qualitative ways.

"We talk a lot ... about how the woman is the cultural, emotional centre of the family. A business is no different from a family," said Deb McVittie, owner of 32 Books. "Women take more time to get to know people."

"I had an older customer in this morning and she's having some trouble with her hips. She lives a mile and a half away. I said to her, 'If you need a book, we'll just drop it off.'"

"It's not that men wouldn't do that, but there's a competitive piece that comes along with the male psyche that pushes them forward perhaps without seeing the forest for the trees. We kind of see the trees first."

When a good customer's son told McVittie that his dad had had a stroke, she put together some books for him to take to the hospital. "Would a man have done that? Maybe. Or would he have said, 'Really sorry to hear about that. I hope things get better soon?'"

"Women realize that our emotional, real, day-to-day lives is what makes the world go around, and I think we honour that," McVittie said.

"I think the more male culture, although it can be very team oriented, it's also more competitive, and sometimes that precludes the ability to find the gentler side of the situation."

It's all very lovely, warm and fuzzy, "but the truth is that incredibly smart businesswomen lead the businesses here," said Tate, who with other Village veterans Sandra Bodnachuk, owner of Zig Zag, and Sharyn Webber, owner of Highland Optical, promptly built an advertising campaign around the women-dominant ownership in the Village.

"As a group of women in business, we have just instinctively sought one another out, and formed friendships, both personal, and professional," Webber said. "We formed a loose mentorship group a number of years ago, where, with a facilitator, we were able to assist one another with our business worries, future plans, staffing, that sort of thing. In confidence, sharing everything from soup to nuts."

And more female entrepreneurs are moving in.

Diana Gunderson, 26, bought Giftworks giftshop with her parents' help when she was 22. The previous owners were family friends.

"We're always thinking of the community and how to make it a more pleasurable, happy, safe place. That not only drives business for us, but gives back to the community," Gunderson said. "There's a different vibe, and our customers say it all the time."

Gunderson said 80 per cent of her clientele are also women.

Gunderson believes the older generation of strong, independent women owners paved the way for her generation. Even the staff she inherited — "some of the ladies were in their 60s" — took her under their wings.

Although Gunderson said she sometimes doesn't receive the respect she deserves, it probably has more to do with her age than her gender. Customers will ask to talk to the manager and ignore her, speaking directly to her older female employees.

McVittie bought her bookstore from another woman owner nine years ago.

"I think the percentage of women owners has grown, but it has always been up there. Like attracts like," McVittie said. "It's all about building community, and women are really good at building community. That's what it comes down to."