



FEATURE BUSINESS

Hempire

by
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HEMPIRE has been in operation in downtown Fernie since 2001. What many people don't realize is that it has sister stores doing business in Canmore, Banff, Red Deer, Cochrane, and is opening this month in Whistler.

It all began with a job at a film lab in Banff, Alberta in 1995. Marsha Churchill was working as a retail clerk and processor

where she was approached by a tour group to accompany them on a trip to B.C. As she was new to the area and had not yet visited British Columbia, she happily accepted the offer to tag along as the photographer.

The drive was beautiful until the group turned off the highway and the trees disappeared. "I couldn't believe it!"

exclaimed Churchill. "That was the first time that I had ever seen clear cutting. I was horrified." She immediately started questioning one of the tour guides about the possible remedies for such a devastating event. He offered Marsha some facts about hemp: one acre of hemp equals four acres of trees and trees take 40 years to grow to full maturity while hemp only takes 90 days. That was all it took to get Marsha hooked on hemp. Her quest for information began with her first visit to a "hemp" store to buy the book *The Emperor Wears No Clothes* by Jack Herer. After reading the book it became her passion and obsession to inform others of all she was discovering about hemp and its ceaseless benefits. "I couldn't stop talking about it. There was so much information that people just had no idea about because hemp had been labeled as marijuana." That's when her decision was made. Marsha Churchill would open the first retail hemp store in the Bow Valley and help spread the word! "I've always had a little fight in me," she says with a twinkle in her eye that lets the listener know that that is an understatement!

To start the business from the ground up was a feat in itself. "I immediately applied for more jobs and held 2 – 3 at all times to save money for the store." A business student helped her write the business plan and she began the search for a storefront. Marsha left the business plan with a landlord at the first location she found that she felt would be suitable. She was quickly called back for a meeting and returned with her hopes high only to be told, "You are 23 years old and you want to open a hemp store? Not in my building, honey!" But that didn't slow Churchill down. Weeks later while helping out someone in need, she discovered a better option for a location than the first and sold everything she owned to secure the lease. "I pawned movies, CD's, sold most of my clothes, and even sold my car which I swore would be the only thing I wouldn't do to start the business."

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So there it was! The first ever Hempire was born! Churchill admits that the first year was hard. “I opened with all hemp products and no smoking products whatsoever. After a half dozen people came in every day asking for smoking products I decided to get some in to keep the store open.” That helped. Shortly after this time, the town passed a bylaw which banned sandwich boards on sidewalks. The leased space was located just off the main sidewalk so this new bylaw delivered the second big blow to her sales as she relied on her signs to direct customers to her “off the beaten trail” location. Thank goodness for the “little bit of fight” that Churchill has in her because her next move was one of her best. She bought and decaled the first VW Hempire car and parked it on main street at the opening to her lane. Sales doubled over night... literally. She was on her way to success!

“After being open for three years in Canmore I really wanted to open in another location. Fernie seemed like a good idea because the busy season was the opposite to Canmore’s.” Marsha explained how while living in the Canmore and

Banff area it was common to hear people talking about how “awesome” the hill in Fernie was. It seemed like the obvious choice even though she had never even visited the town.

Off she set for the next chapter of Hempire. She immediately found a great location and tracked down an excellent employee who had worked for her in Canmore and had moved to Fernie the previous year. “I love it here and moved here completely within the first few months.” admits Churchill.

“The next turning point was when a book was recommended to me by a fellow business woman. It was *The E-Myth* by Michael Gerber which discusses the creation of a business model that works independently of the owner. How perfect. I immediately began implementing changes to management, introduced the ‘Employee Handbook’ and started running the businesses as if they were franchises.” The idea of going nation wide with Hempire was exciting. Marsha knew she must first set out to achieve having her own two locations begin to run themselves.

“I knew that in order to be taken seriously I would have to hire a franchise consultant and make sure I had a really great franchise package.” Churchill drove to Vancouver to meet a consultant who had franchised McDonalds for 17 years. There she endured a four hour interview and then four days of him reviewing everything to do with her business. He then agreed to take her on as a client. The franchise package was put together and Hempire was accepted into the CFA (Canadian Franchise Association) which was very important to Churchill.

While beginning to franchise the business, Marsha had two children within one year and sold the Banff and Canmore stores to new franchisees. “With two babies around the expansion was going much slower than originally planned, but the job was still getting done.” Churchill is pleased to report that during that crazy “baby season” stores were opened in Red Deer and Cochrane. The soon to be Whistler, BC location will be open for business on July 1, 2009 (just in time for the 2010 Olympics). “Jen Forrester, the employee I tracked down when I first came to Fernie and who has worked with me for nearly eight years, along with her brother Adam, are the proud owners of the Whistler franchise.”

“I am pleased with the way things are going and am very excited to be working with some great new franchise consultants who have new and fresh ideas. We have a constant flow of interested franchisees and I couldn’t be happier with the response to our franchise concept.” With a final statement from Churchill, she says with a smile, “I am so happy with the path I have chosen. I love my work, our clientele is great, and the franchisees are all such fun, environmental, and easy going people. We really have a great team.” Although many big franchise consulting firms have suggested to Marsha that moving to a bigger centre would greatly benefit the franchise growth she casually says, “Fernie is home and this is where we will stay.” Fernie - Home of Hempire franchise head quarters! ✨