

“I know everything about cabinets — I’m really good at organizing and designing. But it’s the company culture and the personnel management that is my biggest growth area right now.”

Arlene McPherson, a woman with blonde hair, is smiling and leaning on a stack of grey cabinet panels in a factory setting. She is wearing a blue cardigan over a black top. The background shows industrial equipment, wooden materials, and overhead lights.

Building a DREAM

Arlene McPherson of McPherson Cabinetry

▶ BY TESS VAN STRAATEN | PHOTOS BY DON DENTON

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APLE Bay's Arlene McPherson belongs to a rare group of people who can say they've lived on all three of Canada's coasts.

"Most people don't know I lived in a small community called Arviat in the eastern Arctic for two years," says the 60-year-old co-owner of McPherson Cabinetry. "So I've lived on all three coasts of the country — although one was frozen most of the time so I hardly ever got to see it!"

Arlene, who grew up in Edmonton and has lived in Nova Scotia and Hay River, moved to Vancouver Island in 1995 with her family. They settled in the Comox Valley, where Arlene started her first business.

"I'm a journeyman cabinetmaker and I've been a cabinetmaker for 30-odd years now," she says. "It was a very small cabinet shop in Cumberland called She Saws Woodcraft. It was with just me and one or two helpers, and we built custom kitchens and furniture."

The mother of three moved to the Cowichan Valley a decade ago and worked at Gillingham Cabinets. But when the owner closed up shop in 2014, Arlene decided to venture out on her own again. With business partner Alister Frayling, she launched McPherson Cabinetry four years ago and hasn't looked back.

"The market has consistently gotten stronger and stronger. There have been a lot of organizational challenges and growth challenges because the construction industry has just been booming on the island," Arlene explains. "We've been scrambling to keep up for four years."

With a buzzing business, they quickly outgrew their first shop in the first year, necessitating a move to a building that was double the size. The company now has 17 employees; with orders pouring in and a lot of repeat business, it moved to another new location in July of 2017.

"We're still growing but we're definitely not going to move again!" says Arlene. "We've added a mezzanine space to our current building and we're just trying to run things in a way that makes us very lean manufacturing. I'm putting more emphasis on the scheduling and we're not building a lot of stuff ahead of time. I can make this space work for quite a long time as long as our scheduling is tight and efficient and organized."

Being an entrepreneur comes naturally to Arlene, whose first career was as a social worker. But she says she loves working with her hands, and making things is her passion.

"I've always liked making things," she says. "I grew up on a farm and so we were always building chicken coops and rabbit pens. I love building something and seeing a



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finished product — something that I made. That gives me a lot of satisfaction.”

As managing partner, Arlene is no longer building, but she says seeing the finished product go out the door to happy customers gives her the same satisfaction. She also relishes the challenge of running her own business.

“I’m the oldest of seven children, so I’ve always been quite independent and enjoyed working on my own,” she says. “I’m very self-motivated and I’ve never been totally happy working for others.”

But the biggest challenge for Arlene has been learning to manage staff and cultivating a company culture where employees are engaged and motivated.

“The thing I learn every day is that managing the people to run your business is the biggest challenge and the biggest ‘make or break’ in business,” Arlene says. “You can organize all you want, you can have all the customers you want, but if your staff isn’t happy and motivated then you don’t have a business that’s moving forward.”

Recognizing the importance of strong leadership, Arlene decided to start working with a business coach and she admits people management has been a big learning curve.

“I know everything about cabinets — I’m really good at organizing and I’m really good at designing,” Arlene says. “But it’s the company culture and the personnel management that is my biggest growth area right now. I want this to be a positive business. I want people to want to work here and I want to attract the best talent in the valley and that doesn’t just happen with money or wages.”

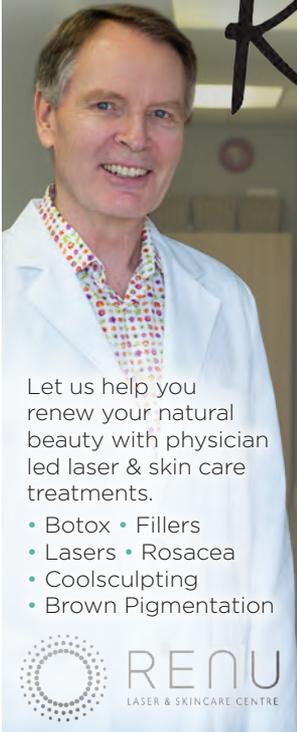
As for being a woman in such a male-dominated industry, Arlene says it hasn’t been an issue for her but she’s disappointed that more women haven’t gone into the trade.

“I have two women in the shop working for me now and I try to hire women, but I’ve been in the business for 30 years and the proportion of women in trades doesn’t seem to have changed much,” she says. “One thing I would love to do when I have more time is to be more of a mentor to women who want to come into this kind of trade.”

For now, Arlene is focussing on the continued growth of the business in Cowichan and Victoria as she builds her dream.

“My biggest lesson is to always stay positive, to always look forward, to learn from your mistakes, to keep moving forward and to keep trying to get better and better.” **📌**

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