

Charowit Trading Company

Wholesale trading company looks to international suppliers

Jaylene Belcher still can't quite believe that she is President of an international company, Charowit Trading Co.

"I have always said how fun it would be to shop and travel," she said. "I obviously couldn't do all of this without my mother's work." Her mother is Dixie Belcher, a well known social activist from Juneau. "Through my mother's contacts this whole thing has sort of fallen into place."

Belcher said the business is an outgrowth of a business tour her mother asked her to coordinate last spring in Anchorage. The tour was a success, and Russians from the mining community of Norilsk who attended wanted Jaylene Belcher to help them start a new company. In fact, they elected her president.

"I organized their tour as a favor to my mom, and the next thing I knew I was being elected president of an international company."

She said that during the trip she met people interested in selling mammoth ivory, and that was the start of her own Charowit Trading Company. She still works with the people from Norilsk, getting arts and crafts, but their interests are more oriented toward mining and oil.

"I had just finished a job in the legislature and had a few opportunities, but nothing that was a career track for me," Belcher said.

"When this opportunity came about it was perfect timing. I am at a place in my life where I can afford to take the risk of starting my own business. I have a supportive husband, no kids and no mortgage."

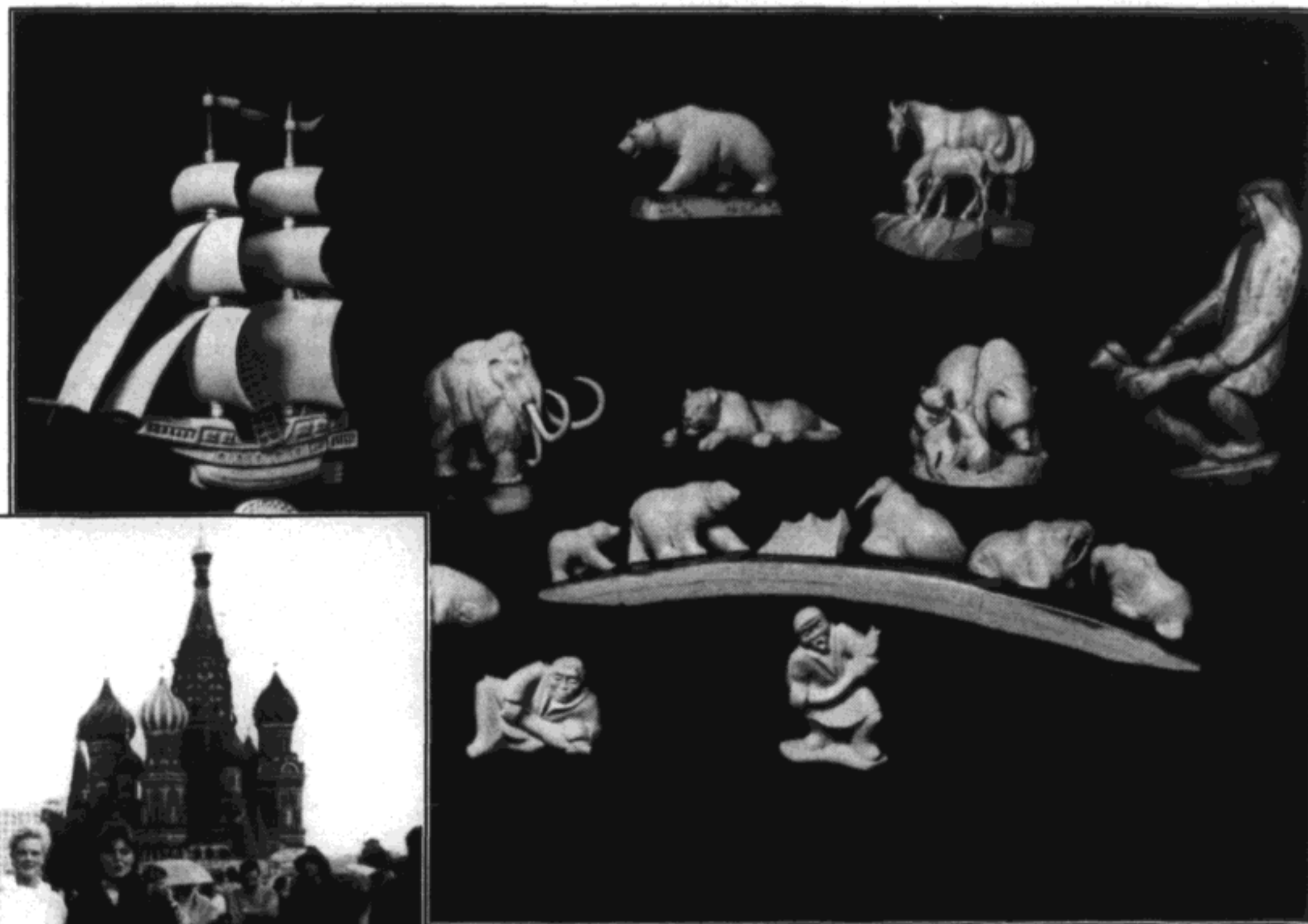
The first trip was mostly a research trip to see what was available. Her mother's contacts proved to be invaluable. "People flew in from all over the former Soviet Union to meet with me. It was really amazing how the doors opened," she said.



Trips to Russia by Jaylene Belcher and her sister have netted lasting relationships with trade partners.

Since the initial trip to Moscow Belcher and her associates have been doing research into how exactly the wholesale business works. She said they have nearly completed the organizational stage and are now looking for financing. She added that she is seeking private investors.

There are four product lines ranging from the less expensive giftware, which includes items for as little as \$5, to mammoth ivory products costing up to \$10,000.



Exquisite carvings of mammoth ivory make up one of four product lines offered by the Charowit Trading Company.

Besides the giftware and mammoth ivory, the lines include indigenous art and collectors' stones. The name of the business comes from the purple stone Charite, found only in the Yakutsk Region of Russia.

"We misspelled Charite with a 'w' and have not been able to think of a different name," she said. Belcher said she buys the lower-priced items outright and then sells them wholesale, while the more expensive inventory is generally sold on a percentage basis.

Belcher said she expects that much of her business will come from the Lower 48, but that Alaskans who cater to tourists may take an interest in some of the items.

"I have been fortunate so far, and the team of people working with me has really come together," she said. She explained that a Moscow associate watches for new product lines, negotiates prices and prepares inventory. Tod Fiscus, also from

Juneau, has a Russian studies degree from the University of New Mexico. He is working as a translator for the company and is preparing to move to Russia to help with problems associated with doing business there.

Belcher said there are a lot of hurdles one must jump over while working with Russians and their emerging economy. "Banking alone is a nightmare," she said, adding she hopes Fiscus will help with such headaches.

"We are a young company and have a lot to learn," she said. "I think this is an advantage to us. Anyone who goes to Russia and expects to do business as usual is in for a big surprise. One of the biggest things I am learning is patience and persistence."

Anyone who wants to contact Belcher can call Charowit at 789-0449 in Juneau. ■