

Business Feature

Naabia Niign, Ltd.

Owner of Northway's grocery store and gas station

The many thousands of tourists who travel the Alaska Highway each year have more than dust covered motor homes in common. Their initial contact with "civilization" inside the Alaska border, located at the junction of the Northway road and the Alaska Highway, is also what provides them their first real impression of Alaska's past and present. The arts and crafts shop, grocery store, gas station and RV park here are owned and operated by Naabia Niign, Ltd., a subsidiary of the local village corporation.

Proximity to Alaska's eastern gateway isn't the only reason Northway's arts and crafts shop has a big advantage with tourists. Because the Athabascan beadwork from the region enjoys a reputation for being delicate and precise, it is a particular favorite.

Emma Glazier Hildebrand is president of Northway Natives, Inc., and the business manager for Naabia Niign, Ltd. A shareholder in the corporation, she is of Athabascan descent and was raised in Northway. She earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. While attending college she maintained the goal of returning to her village to work for her Native corporation.

Naabia Niign has two full-time, year-round employees, Hildebrand and Becky Gallen, the secretary-bookkeeper. During the winter months they employ three part-time workers in the grocery store, one maintenance person and one janitor. During the summer they have six or more employees who rotate between the store and gift shop. On occasion they hire local students through the Jobs Training Partnership Act program.

Besides the Athabascan beadwork, also popular are birch bark baskets, carvings made of moose and caribou antler, moosehide moccasins, beaded-top skin boots, porcupine quill earrings, beaded hair barrettes, and beaver and martin skin hats. The store accepts orders for custom-made items on a regular basis.

Naabia Niign purchases the traditional

handicraft items from local Athabascan men and women. They average about 15 suppliers who fill orders on a repetitive basis, but have many artisans who will sell unique specialty items once in a while.

Naabia Niign also offers these items on a wholesale basis to other gift shops and specialty stores throughout Alaska. They enjoy consistent quality in their supply and have been able to develop repeat purchases by satisfied shop owners who like the fact that they only have to make one phone call to Northway, rather than fly out to the bush to search for quality items in numerous communities.

Naabia Niign has been able to acquire consistency in the quality of their sale offerings because local artisans appreciate the opportunities, but also the demands, of the marketplace.

Local residents of Northway have, over the years, begun to feel pride in the demonstrated successes of Naabia Niign. Local people now do their shopping there and feel good about the jobs that are created in their own community.

Village grocery stores in highway communities are often difficult business propositions. Customers can stock up simply by getting into their cars and driving to where the products are cheaper. As Naabia Niign's goodwill and corresponding sense of community pride has grown, Hildebrand has seen people make more and more of their purchases locally. Increased local buying has improved Naabia Niign's finances. Increased revenues will go towards improving the quality of services provided by the various businesses.

Being a village business has presented unique opportunities. Simply by virtue of being a part of the local ANCSA village corporation, Naabia Niign has been able to enter different business arenas with little difficulty. For instance, when the highway was improved in 1986 and 1987, Naabia Niign installed an RV park on land that was part of the parent corporation's ANCSA entitlement. Since land is the major asset of an RV operation, Naabia Niign had a definite capitalization advantage.

In addition, the gift store has a unique