

Indaba TRADING



Creative Comforts

Irene Held and Alison Gillespie reflect on Indaba Trading's three-decade history of providing the gift industry with a carefully crafted lifestyle collection

By Erica Kirkland

In 1985 Irene Held left her home in South Africa, fleeing a political situation she disagreed with, a collapsing economy and a country increasingly riddled with violent crime. When she landed on Vancouver Island, her highest priority was finding employment and a decent place for her then husband, herself and their newborn baby boy to live. Never did she imagine that three decades later her priorities would still revolve around home. Rather than finding a roof to sleep under, Irene's focus these days is creating a home goods collection celebrated by thousands of store owners across North America, a role she's now thrilled to play alongside her

daughter Alison Gillespie.

Based in Parksville, B.C., the town in which she landed as an immigrant, Irene started Indaba Trading in 1990. (Indaba is an African word for a gathering of people.) The government was offering women a course on how to become business owners, and while the course didn't offer Irene much in the way of a business plan, it did provide her with daycare for her now two young children and a small stipend which she used to launch a small importing business.

Like many entrepreneurial suppliers in Canada's gift industry, Irene started, placing an ad in a South African trade journal for a supplier of Zulu baskets





and raku pottery. When the boxes of samples arrived via Canada Post, covered on all four sides with postage stamps, she intended to sell them to gallery and boutique owners on Vancouver Island, but the first store she entered encouraged her to attend the Vancouver Gift Show. Not surprising to those familiar with Indaba's stunning show setups, Indaba's first booth was a jaw dropper – a miniature replica of an African hut filled with tightly woven Zulu baskets, African-made animal-shaped candles, colourful raku bowls and Zulu bead work. Buyers were blown away at the interesting array of artisan goods and Irene left the March 1990 Vancouver Gift Show with the award for best booth in hand, along with a few small orders.

"It all went very quickly after that," says Irene regarding how the business grew. "We attended the Edmonton show in August 1990 and the Vancouver show again in September and kept growing our business by attending trade shows. Back then you could just 'show up and throw up' a booth and buyers would marvel at the products we had sourced as they couldn't be found anywhere else."

The logistical challenges of shipping from South Africa and the limited market for Zulu baskets encouraged Irene to look to other countries for other opportunities. She expanded Indaba's product assortment to include large statement pieces from Mexico – huge tin lanterns and mirrors, iron furniture and glass vases. Next, she explored Eastern Europe to



source blown glass and in the early 2000s she ventured to China. Eventually she found her manufacturing home in India where she and daughter Alison have formed strong bonds with their suppliers who excel in the artisanal traditions of block printing, weaving, dyeing and decoration.

Travelling to India took a bit of getting used to. "At first, the intense heat, the cacophony of noise and the onslaught on the senses was overwhelming," says Irene, "but today Ali and I navigate India more comfortably and love working with our vendors and the artisans who handmade each item and bring our vision to life."

"They are like family," says Alison. "They invite us into their homes for dinner. We have very close relationships with them."

From playing in empty boxes as a toddler to helping at trade shows in high school, Alison grew up in the business. She left the island after high school and completed a bachelor's degree at Colgate University in New York. Determined to make it in the world on her own, she spent a number of years working in public relations, first in Seattle and later in Vancouver, before joining Indaba fulltime in 2013. Since then Alison has become the face of Indaba and the driver of the creative vision. She serves as the company's creative director and is fully invested in all aspects of the business.

"Almost by osmosis we seem to view beauty – in nature and in our creations – through the same lenses," says Irene. "This allows us to share and embrace the same vision that

crystallized 30 years ago at the birth of Indaba. We both believe that life is better when you surround yourself with meaningful things that provide comfort, pleasure and beauty."

After 30 years, the trade show circuit holds little appeal for Irene, but thankfully Alison's youthful energy has afforded the company the opportunity to re-enter the U.S. market and have a significant presence in Atlanta, Las Vegas and Dallas, in addition to the Toronto Gift + Home Market, where they meet customers and launch collections.

Indaba is not only led by a dynamic female duo, but it also employs over 30 full-time employees – all but one or two of whom are female. The female-central aspect of their operation is important to Irene and Alison as is continuing to source products which are ethically produced.

"We travel extensively to India, China, Vietnam and Europe, working with authentic craftspeople and age-old traditions to build our stories," says Irene.

"We touch everything," continues Alison. "From product development to catalogue creation, we promote our makers and design modern craft lifestyle collections with a focus on handmade, sustainability and fun."

"We care about our work and we work hard because we care," says Irene. "We take pride in being interesting and eclectic. We're diverse, we tell stories and we're never boring."

These are all aspects of the company that Indaba's throngs of loyal customers hope will never change.