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Business of the Week: MacKenzie-Childs creates magic in the Finger Lakes

by Allen, Paul

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AURORA - Victoria MacKenzie met Richard Childs at Alfred University in the mid-1970s, when both were working toward their graduate degrees in ceramic sculpture. Victoria, originally from San Francisco, and Richard, from Massachusetts, both became disillusioned with the fine-arts world. "It was not quite as altruistic as we'd imagined in our idealistic world," Victoria says. "It was much more politically oriented than artistically oriented."

After graduating, the couple moved to the United Kingdom, where - they worked at a pottery for a few years before moving back to New York State. In New York, Richard took a part-time teaching job at Wells College in Aurora. The couple's young daughter, Heather, wanted to go to ballet school overseas and since the couple wasn't financially able to accommodate her, Heather says she sold raspberries from the back field until she raised enough money for the trip.

But Heather didn't raise enough money to get back home. Victoria and Richard needed to raise money, and selling their pottery and other artwork seemed like a good idea.

In March 1983, MacKenzie-Childs, Ltd. was born. "We really only thought of it as a way to see our daughter again, we never really said, 'Let's start a business,' " Victoria says. "It wasn't an overnight success, either. Our whole lives were focused on a creating a facility with a true artistic understanding and training. We had to build it one piece at a time."

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never less than 30- or 40-percent increases. Then it dipped for a couple of years, but now we're coming back out."

Describing MacKenzie-Childs' product line concisely is difficult. The company's craftspeople produce pottery, furniture, lamps, socks, linens, glassware, paper products, clothing, enamelware, and even trailer interiors. "We are quite diverse," Victoria says, "Because we are a design-oriented company, we thrive on experimentation. That's part of what attracts the public to us. There's a feeling of 'ever-evolving' that relates to all human nature that sense of turbulence and change and questioning. It's a childlike quality that gives MacKenzie-Childs its stability in spite of its sporadic nature." The most expensive product MacKenzie-Childs makes is a totally refurbished Airstream Trailer selling for \$200,000, while its least expensive product is a \$5 sock purse. Although some of the products are pricey, Victoria says she wants to keep MacKenzie-Childs accessible to everyone. "We want to be inclusive, not exclusive. There's no snob appeal to our products. We want our products to appeal to everyone."

According to Victoria, the biggest problem facing MacKenzie Childs right now is paying the rent for two new stores that haven't opened yet. "These are probably the most expensive rents in the world," she says. "One is on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills and the other is on Madison Avenue. Once we get the stores built out and opened, that will take care of itself" The Beverly Hills store is expected to open in April and the Madison Avenue store in July.

Victoria sees her company expanding into new venues in the future. "I see MacKenzie-Childs reaching out globally. I'd like to see us producing films, music, and books. We have a great potential for that and dabble with it all the time. I want MacKenzie-Childs to be accessible to everyone in some form. I think we have a message that is very important for all mankind. It's all in our mission statement: "three qualities freedom, jubilation, and purity - are essential to the inner fiber of civilization."

The Aurora facility has a showroom and an outlet store, as well as a restaurant, "Happy Eating." Studio tours are given weekday mornings.

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