

A Woman Business Owner Finds Global Success in Eco-Friendly Furniture



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Nicole Wakley, founder of eco-friendly furniture venture Tree. TREE

Nicole Wakley's entrepreneurial career is rooted in love and instinct.

In a leap of faith, the former lawyer started her international eco-friendly furniture business, Tree, in 2005. She had no prior business experience, she says, but knew "in my heart that it wasn't going to fail."

It turned out to be a solid gamble. The company reported 2017 revenue of HK\$77.3M or about \$9.9M, and now has more than 65 employees across

three stores in Hong Kong, as well as 13 workers in a new Tacoma, Wash., location. And in January, Tree debuted on Hong Kong's Growth Enterprise Market stock exchange, raising HK\$60M, or roughly \$7.7M, in an initial public offering of stock to fund further expansion in Hong Kong.

Each piece of furniture Tree sells is made from recycled materials that, as Wakley puts it, showcase the "beauty of imperfection" -- materials like reclaimed wood from boats and recycled paper, for example. To source these special items, Wakley has sought out and forged relationships with a vast network of partners and individual artisans in Asia and the United States who make furniture in small batches.

Wakley says she's committed to this approach and vows that, no matter how big her business gets, "Tree will stay true to its roots."

A Childhood Dream

Wakley was born and raised in a small village outside of London, with “one church and one pub.” The town also had one antique shop that captured her imagination whenever she walked by. When her parents asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she described owning a “tiny, romantic, nostalgic little furniture shop” like the one near her childhood home.

Her priorities shifted as she aged, though. She earned a law degree from the University of Bristol in 1993 and a certificate to practice law from the College of Law in 1994. Then, she landed a job at a top firm in London.

But as time went on, she found herself unsatisfied with her career trajectory. On a whim, she requested a transfer to Hong Kong -- a city she had never even visited -- aiming to spread her wings and see more of the world.

Four weeks later, in 2000, Wakley was living in China. It was, for her, a sea change, and she recalls being enamored with the pace, diversity and spirit of the city. Meanwhile, she continued to do legal work, handling large cases dealing with pension fund fraud, professional indemnity and more. For her efforts, she was named a leading young lawyer in *The Legal 500*.

“While on the one hand this massaged my ego, it also gave me an opportunity to step back and recognize within myself what I define as success” -- and it wasn’t winning legal cases.

It turns out that, years later, she still hadn’t shaken her childhood dream of owning a furniture shop. In 2005, she decided to make it come true and put her savings toward the first month’s rent for Tree’s flagship location.

She bought pieces from family carpenters throughout Asia, whom she met while traveling the continent during vacations with her then-fiance, Nigel, a pilot. She admits that, initially, her furniture was a tough sell in the city, because the design aesthetic in Hong Kong at the time valued the perfection of mass-produced modern items. For its first year, Wakley was Tree's only employee.



Tree's reclaimed pine table, made by hand using pine salvaged from deconstructed buildings. TREE

But people soon found their way through her shop's doors, and fell in love with what they discovered, she says. Even being a solopreneur had its merits, she says, providing direct insight into the pain points future employees would grapple with, while teaching her how to handle any task.

Within a year, Wakley was ready to expand both her business and her family. She married Nigel and became pregnant with their first son, while preparing to launch a second Tree location in 2006.

Going Global

Opening that second location elevated Tree's brand recognition in Hong Kong, Wakley says. And within another year, she was once again pregnant, and once again eyeing a new retail location.

This one, a 25,000 sq. ft. space that had previously served as a sim card factory, was a much larger undertaking than her first two, smaller boutiques. It was in need of serious renovations -- at first, Wakley had to go through an oxygen shower and wear a special suit to visit it. And, she admits that neither her finances, staff size nor product inventory were conducive to the move.

But Wakley followed her intuition once again. “I knew it was going to fly,” she says. And it did -- after opening in 2008, Tree was strong enough to allow her to relocate to Australia in 2010 and run it from afar. “I wanted my children to grow up in nature, grounded by Mother Earth, running around barefoot in a back garden,” which is not something Hong Kong could offer.

While continuing to manage Tree remotely, Wakley and her husband secured 300 acres of land in New South Wales, and learned how to live a sustainable life while homeschooling their children. They lived there for several years, until her children outgrew the education she could offer, and the family was forced to start its next chapter.

She chose the Pacific Northwest of the United States after receiving numerous requests from area business leaders to set up franchises there. As soon as she arrived in Washington state in 2015, she felt she had made the right decision. “There is a conscious mindset here, a connection with nature and an outdoor lifestyle,” she says, adding that the region “resonated nicely with my family.”

After renovating a historic location in Tacoma, Wash., she opened a store there 4 months ago.

Committed to Sustainability

Wakley aims to open more locations in Washington in the coming years, with her sights set on Seattle and Bellevue. Further down the road, she hopes to bring her furniture and sustainable philosophies to other parts of the U.S., in hopes of giving Americans “the opportunity to make a difference in the world at large from their home, outward.”

That ripple effect of change is something she also lives out through Tree's philanthropic efforts. The company partnered with Trees4Trees, an Indonesian nonprofit, in 2010. To date, Tree has contributed to the planting of over 77,000 trees throughout the world. It then began working with Forterra, a Washington-based land-protection effort, soon after moving to the state.

As her business has grown, Wakely has maintained her commitment to working with artisans who use sustainable materials, rather than turning to mass production. "In this way, Tree honors its principles of sustainability and craftsmanship, while growing its connections from the Pacific Northwest" and beyond.

Wakley knows that a business built on intuition and lofty ideals may seem less grounded to some, but she points to her venture's international success as proof that "it's not just a fluffy dream -- it's a dream materialized."

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Feb 20, 2018

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