

ELLE ENGLANDER

Garden photography by Radosław Berent
Portrait & warehouse
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Curated by Michele Muska



Elle Englander emigrated as a teenager from Bolesławiec, Poland in 1982 to come to the U.S. and settle in Suffield, Connecticut with her older brother, her mother and her father (a political dissident). Elle never lost her deep appreciation for the beauty of her homeland and, in particular, the charming hand-painted Bolesławiec stoneware (also known as Polish Stoneware) that was central to every family meal. Using her innate business savvy, Elle created a success story that would keep her firmly entrenched in her roots—**Janelle Imports**—the world's largest importer of Bolesławiec Polish stoneware.

I grew up in a tight-knit community in the town of Bolesławiec, Poland, where both my parents worked in the local stoneware factory. My parents had deep roots in the community of approximately 40,000 residents, and my mother worshipped nearby in a beautiful 12th-century Catholic church. Situated on the Bóbr River in the Lower Silesia in southwestern Poland, Bolesławiec looks like a fairytale city with its cobblestone streets, rows of ancient tenements built in the Baroque and Renaissance styles, 12th-century churches and charming shops along city streets. Throughout history, this region experienced numerous foreign occupations, but the indigenous clay and pottery making remains since the 7th-century.

During my childhood, Poland was under Soviet's communist rule, and although such life is hard to imagine now, I would describe my childhood as a happy one surrounded by close family, friends and a nurturing community. Everything changed at midnight on December 13, 1981, when my father, Ryszard Łoś, along with thousands of members of Solidarity, were arrested and jailed. My mother, brother and I would not know his whereabouts, or even if he was still alive, for the next nine months. Eventually, a resolution came in the form of a deal between the communist government of Poland and two western anti-communist countries (The United States and The United Kingdom) which allowed imprisoned Solidarity members to leave Poland on a one-way passport as political asylum recipients. After being vetted, my father, mother, brother and I arrived in the United States in November of 1982.

Those first years were tough, having to learn English, making an enormous cultural transition to the hustle and bustle of Perth Amboy, New Jersey (our first home away from home) and finding our way as a family, and as individuals, amidst so many changes. In spite of our challenges in leaving family, friends and life in Bolesławiec—re-inventing ourselves and being thrown into a new culture, language, lifestyle and environment—we became stronger individually, steering ourselves in anticipation of new challenges each day and adapting to constant change. I grew to love the openness and ability to express myself in so many ways in the States. The exposure to a multitude and diverse group of people in the northeast expanded my worldview, and I relished the constant learning opportunities that awaited in every classroom, new encounter and experience.





I have always had an entrepreneurial drive and spirit and grew up observing my parents lead in their communities, whether at the church, a community gathering or the workplace. And, even as a young child of five or six, I was a natural negotiator and was quite feisty. My determination and grit continued to serve me well; I was resilient and open to new situations, as challenging as they might be. Through such times, I developed the mettle to navigate adversity and discomfort, though I found I missed Bolesławiec—its charm, familiarity, craftsmanship and beauty.

In 2002, while visiting my father (who returned permanently to Bolesławiec ten years earlier), he introduced me to founders of Manufaktura, a Polish stoneware factory. They invited me to join them to help introduce their beautiful stoneware to the U.S. market. In 2003, twenty years after I started my new life in the United States—with the encouragement from Manufaktura and my father and the financial and logistical support from my mother, Janina—I founded Janelle Imports. I was in my mid-30s with three children under the age of six, a crumbling marriage and was relying greatly on my mother's help—whose marriage to my father had ended years earlier and whose only wish was to return to Bolesławiec, her 12th-century Catholic church and original life. Creating the company's infrastructure to import Bolesławiec stoneware into the U.S. while also making it viable to support my needs was a big challenge. The business grew incrementally, and while my personal life was challenging, it was a critical time for me to stand on my own two feet as an entrepreneur and build what today has now evolved into a thriving business. What had originated as a hobby for my homesick mother and me is exponentially now bigger in many ways than we ever could have imagined.



JANELLE IMPORTS™

Like many entrepreneurs, I see my business as define myself as a woman and an individual. As many sources including my parents, my early years and my years in the insurance industry—which, business sense, comfort with numbers and people

an extension of myself. It's a huge part of how I a businesswoman, my inspiration has come from in the craftsman-centric community of Bolesławiec while male-dominated, showed me that my inherent skills really lent themselves to entrepreneurialism.

Creating Janelle's infrastructure with three young children, a divorce in process and my mother's preparations to return to Poland was a crazy undertaking in hindsight. Our idea was simple, but we really had no idea how much there was to do when considering we were importing a foreign made product and bringing it straight to the consumer at retail, and now online. Persevering through the hundreds of business barriers and unforeseen challenges through the years has been in many ways, exhausting. I believe, however, that my renewed connection to my homeland through the company deepens my commitment, passion and pride for the business and is way more than just work; it's grown to become a large part of who I am today.



I am a natural leader, comfortable with negotiation and an organization enthusiast. I love the challenges of marketing and connecting with new audiences, cultivating new relationships to grow my brand and make Janelle a destination for multiple demographics. I am active with the business throughout the day and often into the evening and early morning hours due to Janelle Imports being a small retail business with minimal infrastructure, and working regularly within a European time zone. My second husband, Allen, is a great help to me and has become involved in the business with expanding our showroom and warehouse, inventory and back office management; we love working together. We share a common vision for the business and true passion for our product though we find that there aren't enough hours in most days. That said, when the evening comes, we both love cooking and spend most nights collaborating in the kitchen and enjoying our delicious results; cooking together is a great way for us to connect with each other and recharge our batteries. When we are able to break away, we love to head to the shoreline in the summer and mountains in the winter, spending our time enjoying nature which revitalizes us both.

Having seven children between us, all of whom are nearly grown, some with their own families scattered from coast to coast, we have gotten good at instilling important business ethics in them all, often using Janelle as an inspiration for their own pursuits. Some of our children have been involved in different capacities in the warehouse, including working with customers on the floor, unpacking the thousands of imports we receive each month, managing inventory (we routinely have at least 60,000 pieces in the warehouse at any given time) and making marketing videos for our social media platforms. We encourage all of our children to learn about business through Janelle, to cultivate their strengths and skill sets, as well as, to appreciate the rigors and rewards of operating a small business.



Janelle was built around business pillars that work for a growing retail operation that values customer satisfaction and word of mouth as much as e-commerce. In the next five years, I plan to expand the operation to create a more robust destination stoneware shopping experience for our customers. I intend to maintain the import warehouse feel to allow our customers to enjoy browsing amongst the thousands of shapes and patterns for themselves, with everything out in the open so they can see it all. I also envision having a café to offer cultural tastings of light fare and beverages to complement my products and plan to expand my showroom for more space to display suggested arrangements of shapes and patterns a bit more formally—particularly appealing to first-time visitors and those who are considering my bridal registry products (a portion of the business I am very excited about expanding).

Overall, our mission remains to foster good customer relationships, expand our customer base and offer the most extensive array of Bolesławiec stoneware in the world. We have many long-time, loyal customers who are our best marketers and have helped us to grow and sell our products well outside of New England. The growth of Janelle Imports has allowed me to move forward in my life and create a thriving business while memorializing my beloved Bolesławiec past and roots.



The table and home are canvases for our self-expression. Inspire yourself and those around you with beauty and celebrate the craftsmanship of others in the objects you surround yourself with.



Be personally invested in your business so that your passions are really tied to it.

KNOW WHAT YOUR CUSTOMERS WANT Before They Do

As small business artisan entrepreneurs, we often do not have the time, money or resources to acquire sophisticated analytics about our customer's buying habits, needs and future wants. We cannot afford the time or monetary investments to gain controlled analytics about our customers from private research companies, Amazon, Google and larger companies who offer new sales strategies almost daily.

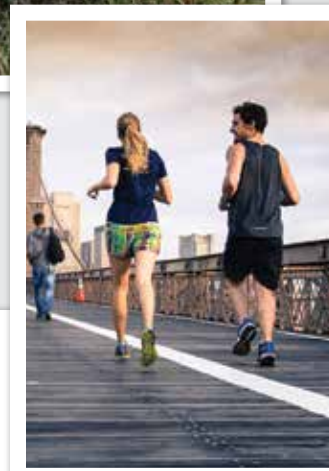
Below are some of the basic strategies that we all can follow, regardless of how small our companies are:

1. Define Objectives

What do you want to achieve:

- A. Overall increased sales/revenues?
- B. Targeted increased sales/revenues?
- C. Increased customer loyalty?
- D. Increased age range of your customers?
- E. Expanded range of customer purchases?

Starting with a clear objective is essential; however, so is being flexible about modifying your objective as company objectives change.



2. Gather Data

To actually be able to anticipate what your customers want before they do, it is essential that you collect detailed data:

- A. Inventory (target age of your inventory, what occupation does your inventory most appeal to, special features of your inventory, etc.)
- B. Offerings (discounts, coupons, sales events, special events, etc.)
- C. Circumstances around buying behaviors (days of the week, times, holidays/celebrations, etc.)
- D. Customer's buying patterns
- E. What are other retail outlets similar to yours offering?
- F. What is the newest trend in magazines targeted to your customer?
- G. Ask your customers for their feedback. What do they like or dislike, wish for, etc.?

3. Understand Your Customer

- A. Age
- B. Gender
- C. Number of children and age of children
- D. Residential address
- E. Occupation, income or assets
- F. Lifestyle—hobbies, habits, interests
- G. Buying habits
- H. If you were the customer what would you want?

Previous purchases can be your single best guide, but don't let past behavior lull you into complacency. In today's world of social media involvement, you can follow your very best customers' posts on Pinterest, Instagram or Facebook, which can indicate their most current interests or wants.

4. Know How Your Customer Makes Contact With Your Business:

- A. In-store for brick and mortar
- B. On the phone
- C. Ordering over the internet

5. Experiment, Learn And Evolve

ELLE & JANELLE IMPORTS
 JanelleImports.com
 Instagram: @JanelleImports

We are excited to share that you can now find our Polish Stoneware within Manufaktura's very first factory store outside of Poland, in the heart of Watch Hill, Rhode Island (110 Bay Street, Watch Hill, Rhode Island, ManufakturaUSA.com).