

A Journey Begins

Over the past decade, the upward arc of Beth Brownlee's career path has included working with leading outdoor companies including Columbia Sportswear, Woolrich, Asics and Hind. Titles such as national sales manager, director of U.S. sales apparel, and member of the Outdoor Industry Association board of directors reflect her expertise and contributions.

Today, Brownlee runs Trust Your Journey, an Internet-based company offering eco-friendly women's apparel, jewelry and accessories that she co-founded in 2007 with her friend and business partner, Ruth Nichols (also a former Columbia Sportswear exec). The new business is starting to resonate with both the industry and consumers, but life wasn't always so rosy. In 2004, the professional challenges of channel management, budget planning and product development lost their significance when Brownlee was diagnosed with breast cancer.

During her darkest hours, a thoughtful note from a colleague brought Brownlee a message of hope and proved to be a personal and professional turning point.

"I was getting ready to quit the chemo and I didn't care if I lived or died," Brownlee recalls. "I found these words and got so focused on them that they pulled me out of the darkness. I knew then that the breast cancer was meant to be and I was supposed to make something good out of something negative."

The hospital lab where Brownlee's chemotherapy sessions were held was set up in a semi-circle of 12 recliners surrounding a nurse's station. Sharing such an intense experience inspired Brownlee.

"During my chemo visits, I would see patients that were on the fence. Some were on the life side, some were on the death side. I thought I could provide something tangible that they could look at, and realize they can win this battle that they are up against. I wanted to create a higher energy," she says.

As Brownlee was busy fighting cancer, Nichols was grappling with the long illness and eventual death of her husband, and the birth of their only child.

On the other side of those life-changing experiences, Brownlee and Nichols have applied their professional talents to a much more personal mission.

"I thought, do you want to launch your own brand or do you want to go back and work for another big corporation? I just decided that if there ever was a time to go do something it's now, and I just went out and did it," says Brownlee. "I've been blessed by my career and it's taught me everything I need to know to get to this point."

The three words, "trust your journey" became the focus of Brownlee's new career path. Fain & Tripp, a marketing firm in Atlanta, brought the words to life. Brownlee explains, "The logo is a combination of a labyrinth and heart.

The labyrinth signifies the journey and the heart is the core of life. I believe the heart has the purest answers." When listening to Brownlee's story, a member of the agency's team twisted a paper clip into a shape that inspired the final logo design.

Trust Your Journey's product offerings include 100 percent organic cotton T-shirts, eco-friendly items printed with water-based inks, seed paper journals, and handmade jewelry. But the company's ultimate mission is far more important than commerce.

"The web site is designed to communicate, educate and make a difference in someone's life," says Brownlee.

"As the site continues to expand it will be about sharing news, medical information and connecting women with similar interests and issues. It's not about selling, but sharing the message."

Brownlee adds, "We want to make as little impact on the world as possible. We use 100 percent recycled paper in company materials, organic cotton in T-shirts, the list goes on. It's not easy for a start-up company to do those things, but I couldn't not do it, because it's the right thing to do."

Outdoor specialty stores will play a significant role in spreading the news. "We're fortunate that we have relationships across the country," Brownlee says. "The industry is very key to the growth of the brand." Future plans include children's products, books, women's-only travel trips, retreats and speaking engagements.

Translating vision to product could easily overwhelm a two-person company, but this has not been a problem for Trust Your Journey. "There are so many details," Brownlee says. "Bless all the people who used to do it behind the scenes for us at bigger companies. We have to manage the details of the supply chain, inventory and the web site. At some point, you get big enough that you can pass [these details] on to other people and stay focused on the creative side."

Born through the trials of surviving some of life's greatest challenges, the Trust Your Journey message resonates with most everyone who hears the words.

"People get it," says Brownlee. "Ruth and I believe in the zero degree theory. Anyone could write down a list of things that are troubling—relationships, finance, career, office gossip, caring for aging parents, illness, raising kids, the list goes on and on. It doesn't have to be a big bump like the ones Ruth and I experienced. Sometimes the small bumps can be the most difficult for people on a daily basis. We found people are relating to Trust Your Journey and everything we are trying to do here. I was fortunate that I ran into breast cancer, and that led me to Trust Your Journey."

—LOU DZIERZAK



Trust Your
Journey



Outdoor industry veterans Beth Brownlee (left) and Ruth Nichols are the founders of Trust Your Journey.