

Sheri Tingey, Entrepreneur Extraordinaire

By *James O. Armstrong*



Sheri Tingey – packrafting in Alaska

Today, **Sheri Tingey**, who is age 60, runs a family business called Alpacka Raft, which has created and built a series of ultra light, packable rafts for use in long distance backpacking and wilderness racing.

Sometimes, a “new” business opportunity can begin with a challenge or a question from a friend or a loved one. And, that’s exactly what happened when Sheri’s son **Thor** asked his Mom to come up with a light-weight raft that could stand up to some of the most demanding parts of Alaska’s wilderness in a sport, where he was an enthusiast.

In the first year, Sheri Tingey’s Alpacka Raft sold 200 carefully crafted units, but had

demand beginning to pick up outside of her Alaska base. In other words, if the rafts were strong enough to withstand Alaska’s wilderness, then challenges from the Lower 48 would be easily surmountable, many potential buyers must have thought. In the process, sales have inched up from 200 to 300 to 400 and, this year, Tingey estimates that her sales will top 700 units from her whole product line with approximately \$500,000 in sales.

So, how did she wind up in Alaska so far away from her Arizona roots? After graduation from the University of Oregon with a degree in Physical Education, Sheri headed to Jackson Hole, Wyoming to ski for just “one season” before getting on with the real world. But while she was there, she

fell in love with skiing and tried to figure out a way to make a living besides waitressing. That is how she happened to start her first business which involved making custom ski wear. Her one-piece snow gear for skiers at the time was sold through six retail shops around the US including Sun Valley, Idaho; Aspen and Vail, Colorado; Alta and Snowbird, Utah; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; and Lake Placid, New York. In that chapter of her life, Sheri would be skiing all day, and then sewing late every night.

After selling her “Design by Sheri” business, which she ran from 1967 to 1982 and which was based in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, she and her husband together with their two children moved to Alaska primarily because of a job offer for her husband. But, Sheri had also wanted to sell her business—in part due to a series of health-related challenges she was experiencing, including chronic fatigue syndrome.

After moving to Alaska, Tingey again tried to sew, but the effort simply drained her. She desperately wanted her old energy level back, and as a consequence felt rotten because it just wasn’t coming back. At the time, her children were small and there were no programs available for them in the Alaska Bush. So, she wound up starting both a swimming and a gymnastics program for rural Alaska kids. Further, since Sheri was able to control the hours, she could also closely monitor how much energy she put out. Doing those morning- or afternoon-only programs, she could work these job assignments into the three good hours she had each day, where she functioned somewhat normally.



The unstoppable Sheri Tingey

Today, Sheri has been married to her husband **Ralph Tingey** for 30 years. But, Sheri's inspiration for her current business—which came at the point in life where she was just beginning to feel good again after a nearly 20 year battle back to health—was and is her son Thor. For his part, Thor Tingey recently took several steps back from the business in order to attend law school. So, Tingey has recently taken a partner, **Jim Jager**, into the business to help her accomplish some of the things Thor or her husband had previously done in the business (up to the time that a suitable business partner could be found.) Finally, Sheri's daughter **Daphne**, who is 23, will be resuming school this Fall near Boulder, Colorado, where she will continue her junior year at Naropa University in Psychology.

For Sheri Tingey and her husband, they had always wanted to move to Alaska, which she described as a state that someone either really loves or they leave it. From the beginning, she said, she and her family always kept a large dog team for racing in Alaska, even when her kids were little. Plus, she said that despite her chronic fatigue, running her dogs was not as tiring as someone might think, and she very much enjoyed the experience. She really loves the wilderness in Alaska, she said, because it offers wonderful freedom to its residents. In addition, Sheri also loves to fish, hike, climb and do any kind of boating. Plus, she loves animals. And, Sheri still loves to sew and to build (which for her means carpentry work). In fact, Tingey describes the similarities between sewing and carpentry and said it was unfortunate that more people (both men and women) don't enjoy the cross-over benefits of both disciplines. Finally, Sheri loves to read too.

In terms of her health struggles, changing her MD to someone else who was willing to try some alternative approaches to medicine made all the difference in regaining her health. Not just vitamins, but Sheri was willing to experiment with a wider range of treatment options than most physicians are willing to utilize. In the end, this alternative medicine approach essentially worked for her. Interestingly, Sheri's health had substantially improved just at the point of her son's challenge.

In turn, Mom Tingey was then excited and challenged to return to the passion of her life, which has long been design. As a child, her grandmother had taught her to sew. But, she came by the design part of her DNA make up quite naturally.

In the future, Sheri concluded she and her husband may decide to take off from November through the end of January, when Alaska experiences that long night in the state. Like many other Alaskans their age, they would/will then plan to come back by February 1st each year.

Her greatest business challenge comes down to correctly estimating the demand for her product ahead of time each year, and then having it manufactured by Feathercraft Kayaks, which uses this down time to produce her rafts. For its part, Feathercraft Kayaks has long been known for making amazing folding kayaks. Plus, the Feathercraft answer now includes a 100% environmentally friendly solution to gluing the bottom of the raft to complete the finished product. In fact, coming up with an environmentally acceptable glue has long been a challenge for all of the raft manufacturers, she confided.

Today, Sheri Tingey takes pride in her workmanship at Alpaca Raft. Now that she has been given a second chance in life to be a designer, she simply wants to make each raft last. Her short-hand way of putting it is this: "I'm just too old to make junk." From being a classic, drop-through-the-cracks kid, Sheri has found her niche, where she excels. Plus, she makes a quality product that anyone would be proud to call their own. Since her rafts can easily last for 15 to 20 years—each year she has to find a whole series of new customers. But, each new raft she plans and makes is built to last. And, that's why Sheri Tingey easily qualifies as our "Entrepreneur Extraordinaire."



Excerpted from the book, *Now What? Discovering Your New Life and Career After 50*, by **James O. Armstrong**. It is available at www.nowwhatjobs.net. NowWhatJobs.net was set up to better inform individuals and employers about the current and coming labor shortage facing North America. James is editor of NowWhatJobs.net, and he is president of James Armstrong & Associates, Inc., which is a North American media representation firm.



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