



Mari Prebeck (left) and Mary Lynn Salisbury, Fireplace Lifestyles

# Women of the HEARTH

BY SHARON SANDERS AND DEIDRA DARSA

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**W**HEN HEARTH-INDUSTRY NEWCOMER MARY LYNN SALISBURY STARTED DOWN THE ESCALATOR AT A NATIONAL TRADE SHOW 30 YEARS AGO, SHE WAS AMAZED THAT THERE WAS NOT ANOTHER FEMALE IN VIEW ON THE CONVENTION FLOOR. SALISBURY (WHO NOW OWNS HER OWN HEARTH RETAIL STORE) REMEMBERS, "WHEN I REQUESTED INFORMATION AT THE BOOTHS, EVERYONE ASSUMED I WAS THE SPOUSE OR DAUGHTER OF A HEARTH STORE'S OWNER."

Although the number of women in the \$3-billion hearth industry is growing, only 23 percent of the 15,000 individuals who make up the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association's membership are women. Those who make it to the top have faced tough times, breaking barriers in what many consider a man's domain. Even those who work side by side with their husbands and families have faced many a skeptic yet accomplished much. These four women, for example, have found success, despite the odds.

## ALYCE L. WITTUS

Wittus is vice president of Wittus – Fire by Design, Pound Ridge, N.Y. From advertising and marketing to high-tech software, she has been a leader throughout her career. As the founder and president of Buttonwood Data Systems, Inc., she grew the computer software and services company into a profitable business that served the



Alyce Wittus, Wittus – Fire by Design

The hearth industry has traditionally been a man's domain, but an increasing number of women are carving out a place for themselves and thriving.

Wall Street community. As president and CEO of C.P.R. & B., Inc., she guided a successful expansion of the agency's direct-mail business.

Today, Wittus manages the marketing, promotion and advertising for the company she and her husband, Niels Wittus, created in 1978. "At first, people laughed at us and called our hearth products pizza ovens," she says, "but we found that architects and designers loved our product." Through directed advertising and a focus on customer service, the company steadily became the leader in the European contemporary hearth market.

Then, in 2005, after a nearly disastrous split from Denmark's RAIS that left them with a backlog of thousands of orders and no way to fill them, Alyce and Niels recreated their company and set out for Europe in search of new suppliers.

It was their determination, business sense and marketing skills that turned around the company. Wittus offers its products and services through three channels: via dealers throughout the nation, directly to architects/designers and builder/contractors, and at retail through a local showroom (to keep on top of current market trends). In less than two years, the Wittus team rebuilt the company, and in 2007, Wittus – Fire by Design sold over 800 units, creating a revenue of \$2.5 million. "We believe in our contemporary designs," Wittus says. In fact, the company has started developing its own products and is working with the original RAIS designer, Bent Falk. The first Wittus design is an outdoor grill, appropriately named Phoenix.

## INGRID SCHROETER

Schroeter is executive vice president of Napoleon Fireplaces & Grills, Barrie, Ontario. In the 1970s, an energy crunch hit North America, and people everywhere were searching for home-heating alternatives. It was a perfect time for Ingrid and Wolfgang Schroeter to apply the skills learned from working for others to begin their joint venture: Napoleon Fireplaces & Grills, the business that put many wood stoves into the homes of those looking for energy independence and a grill in the backyard.

From wood stoves in the 1970s to gas fireplaces in the 1980s to grills in the 1990s, Schroeter, working side by side with her husband, has built one of the most successful multimillion-dollar hearth and barbecue manufacturers on the continent.



Ingrid Schroeter, Napoleon Fireplaces & Grills

"In the beginning, our roles overlapped," she explains. "As you can imagine, a husband and wife in business have arguments, and after a few years, we had to separate our tasks."

Wolfgang looked after production and research and development, while Ingrid took on general busi-

ness management, finance, advertising and sales, which, for a woman in this business, were not easy tasks.

"Many people on the retail side didn't want to talk to me because they thought, 'What does a woman know about a fireplace?' I had to convince people that I knew what I was talking about, and I have had encounters with customers where I knew it just wasn't going to work. Many women in the industry have the same problems," Schroeter says.

She knows, nonetheless, that women have a significant place in the industry. "I think women play a major role in both the fireplace and grill industries. They are focused on the detail and the warmth that make our industry different."

Wolfgang adds, "Ingrid and I have always been a team, working together to grow the business. She has managed the day-to-day operations of the company by herself from the beginning, while at the same time running our home and raising our children. Ingrid's support and dedication have permitted me to focus on new product research and development, which is where my passion lies. One truly complements the other."

## MARY LYNN SALISBURY

Salisbury owns Fireplace Lifestyles, Grand Rapids, Minn. If there is one word to describe her, it's determined. Salisbury has been a part of the hearth industry since the 1970s (when very few women were in the business) and has seen it go through many changes. She has made her way up through the ranks with good old-fashioned hard work and tenacity.

During her more than 30 years in the business, Salisbury has been involved in every aspect of the hearth industry. She's worked with builders, with dealers and on the retail side, as well. In the early part of her career, hearth-specific education was rare, so she took it upon herself to find and take classes; she joined women's networking organizations and gained most of her skills on the job. "There is no hearth college," Salisbury jokes. "I had to do it on my own, and being a woman in a man's field made it even more challenging." In 1999, she opened a hearth retail store, Fireplace Lifestyles, with her husband (and hearth veteran) Spike. They now have two locations in Grand Rapids and Bemidji, Minn. "We have a great partnership that makes our business work," she says.

Salisbury's latest passion is helping young people start their careers in the hearth industry. "Our industry is going through a period where business owners and leaders are starting to retire, and the next generation has to take the reins," she says. Salisbury has taken it upon herself to mentor young people in her stores who have a desire and the talent that it takes to succeed in this challenging industry. She calls her latest protégé, Mari Prebeck, her rising star.

"Mari is intelligent and works hard to understand the needs and desires of her customers," Salisbury says. "She's just as good on the forklift as she is at the computer or writing up project bids."

Salisbury is encouraged that educational and job opportunities for women and young people are more plentiful than ever before today. She hopes that industry organizations will soon create some type of grant program to help up-and-coming leaders get the training and education that they need. "The industry's future is in their hands, and we need to invest in it," she says.

## KRISTA CAMPEAU

Campeau is a sales associate at Summit Home Center, Champlin, Minn. The hearth industry has been her career for over 17 years. She can talk pilot-light ignition, venting and zero clearance as well as anyone. As a woman in the hearth industry, she brings not only her knowledge, enthusiasm and willingness to prosper to the industry; she brings flair.

"I feel women have so much to offer in this traditional man's industry," Campeau says. "I don't think we are better than men, just different." Campeau has worked in retail hearth sales her entire career, including helping to build, from the ground up, two hearth businesses. She has experienced at first hand how refreshing it is to have a woman's perspective and expertise on the sales floor.

Campeau explains that when a man comes into a hearth store with his wife, he typically wants to know how a fireplace or stove works, while she wants to know how it's going to look. "As a woman, I can appeal to women on a visual, emotional level in addition to talking function," she says. Campeau makes it a point to offer simple explanations to customers who are unfamiliar with fireplace terms because she understands how confusing they can be. "You have to be able to close the sale from every angle," she adds.

As the industry is becoming more focused on hearth design, Campeau sees many new opportunities emerging for women in a number of creative fields to move into the hearth industry," she says. When it comes to being creative in the retail environment, Campeau believes that women have a flair for making a showroom warm and inviting, not just a room full of black boxes. "Customers want to see for themselves how a hearth can transform their homes," she explains. "A woman instinctively knows how to do that."



**Krista Campeau,**  
Summit Home Center

Campeau says that she's excited by the possibilities that the future holds for women who want the challenges and rewards that the hearth industry offers. "It's a great industry, with great people, and we all need to work side by side to keep it going strong," she adds. ■

*Deidra Darsa, manager of media and public relations for the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, contributed to this article.*

## Northwest Manufacturing's Furnaces Leave Smaller Footprints

BY CAROL DAUS

Northwest Manufacturing, Inc., based in Red Lakes Falls, Minn., has always been one step ahead of the competition. When Chuck Gagner, president and founder, built his first outdoor wood furnace more than 20 years ago for his family farm, there were very few outdoor wood boilers or stoves that ran as efficiently as his. Before long, his two brothers and his neighbors wanted Chuck to build one for them.

In 1989, Northwest Manufacturing was created to fulfill the burgeoning demand for Gagner's furnaces. Four years ago, the privately owned company doubled its manufacturing capacity by building a 70,000-square-foot factory situated just down the street from its original location. Its outdoor furnaces are now sold by 220 dealers in the Northern and Northeastern regions of the United States.

Gagner and his brothers Ron and Bruce (who are now employees of Northwest Manufacturing) work closely with the company's research-and-development staff to develop environmentally friendly products that are also cost efficient. "Saving money on heating bills is still the number-one concern of our customers, but a growing number are now concerned about buying green products," Gagner says.

Northwest Manufacturing responded to consumer demand by offering outdoor natural-energy furnaces that burn cleanly. The company's WoodMaster Plus natural-energy furnaces reduce fuel costs by as much as 75 percent by efficiently burning corn, wood and paper pellets, barley, beet pulp, sunflowers, dried cherry pits, soybeans and a variety of other renewable fuels.

Two sizes are available, with the appropriate choice depending on heating needs. The newer ASF 900 heats up to 5,000 square feet



**The WoodMaster PLUS offers owners the option of hooking it into their existing heating systems, reducing heating costs as much as 75 percent.**

and can be used for an average-sized home. The larger, heavy-duty ASF 1100 has twice the heating capacity and is well suited to larger homes or commercial businesses.

"Our larger natural-energy furnace was so well received that customers immediately started asking for a smaller unit, so we developed the 900 to heat less square footage," Gagner says.

Since customers also started requesting an automatic feed system for their furnaces, Northwest Manufacturing incorporated on-demand heat technology in the ASF 900 furnace, so it burns only when heat is needed. As the home uses heat from the furnace and the water temperature lowers, the igniter automatically turns the furnace back on to recover the water temperature. In the spring or fall, the furnace may not need to burn all day long to maintain the water temperature.

According to Gagner, a 2,200-square-foot home would cost an estimated \$744 annually to heat with corn, while the same home would cost about \$1,400 to heat with natural gas,

\$1,900 with heating oil and \$2,700 with electricity.

Northwest Manufacturing has also been an industry leader in promoting cleaner-burning outdoor furnaces. The company was one of several manufacturers that teamed up with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association to create the EPA Outdoor Wood-fired Hydronic Heater Program.

The program was created to develop cleaner outdoor wood-fired hydronic heaters that will meet the EPA's Phase I air emissions level of 0.6 pounds of fine particles per million-Btu heat input, which represents a substantial reduction in emissions, compared with those of today's furnaces. Consumers will know which products meet these requirements because they will have a label or hangtag indicating that they met all EPA testing guidelines.

The program, which is only one year old, has already made a strong impression on dealers and customers. "Everyone recognizes that manufacturers need to develop cleaner and more efficient products," Gagner says. Northwest Manufacturing has already demonstrated its strength as an eco-friendly company, since product testing has shown that its corn-pellet furnaces are approximately three times cleaner than what the EPA requires by 2010.

Gagner is extremely optimistic about the future of fuel-efficient outdoor heaters, despite a slow year in 2007. He expects 2008 to be considerably stronger, since consumers are recognizing that new products such as the ASF 900 help reduce heating bills. "I'm hoping that, down the road, we'll continue to have new fuels and technologies to offer our customers so that they can save money and help the environment at the same time," he says. ■