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## **BUILDING A BUSINESS PIECE BY PIECE WITH TALENT AND HARD WORK, EASTERN SHORE ARTIST SARA MCCALED HAS SEEN HER MOSAIC TILEMAKING FIRM TAKE BEAUTIFUL FORM.**

THE FEW CARS gliding slowly down Business Route 13 pass Exmore's modest post office, its Western Auto, the plumbing supply shop.

They pass shuttered businesses and one unmarked, seemingly empty storefront that is more than it appears to be.

Behind its closed blinds, a company led by an Eastern Shore farm girl and staffed by a dozen local women is doing an international business in an all-but-lost art.

That New Ravenna would emerge as one of the Eastern Shore's most exciting ventures seemed almost inconceivable in 1991 when Sarah McCaleb founded one of only two American firms that produces upscale, decorative mosaics..

McCaleb, now 29, was an artist and sometime model born in Nassawadox and raised on her family's farm on Craddock Creek, a marshy finger of the Chesapeake Bay west of Exmore. She'd shown painting talent growing up, but she also had been a bit directionless, something of an impractical romantic. A wee bit flaky.

“ I wouldn't want to use the word 'flighty,' ” said her father, Phil McCaleb, “ but if you'd told me five years ago that today I'd be talking to my daughter about management, and about tax issues, well, I wouldn't have believed it.”

When she returned home after years at the University of Pennsylvania, she brought with her two degrees in fine arts and a reputation for moody, dark paintings. She also brought a baby son.

Her baby, Michael, was a complication in what had been a carefree life of shoelessness and short summer dresses. She needed to find work to support him. She had very little money and zero business background.

She had an idea, however. In a class at Penn, McCaleb had produced a mosaic mural of Eve in the Garden of Eden, and now suspected there might be a market for that sort of artwork.

Using tiny pieces of marble, porcelain and glass, she could create patterned borders for kitchens and bathrooms, foyers and the rims of swimming pools, along with big, intricate, colorful murals.

All of them, like Roman mosaics that have survived centuries of display, would be assembled by hand, squares and slivers carefully trimmed to fit each piece's peculiar nooks.

“ So I pitched the idea to my mom and dad,” she said.

Most parents, asked by a child to invest in a tile company in a remote Eastern Shore village, might not reach for their wallets. Hers did.

“ Somehow I talked them into giving me free rent for a year,” she said, “ and then they refinanced their house and gave me a \$5,000 loan.”

McCaleb and Michael moved into an empty house on the family farm, turned its living room into a studio and started cranking out samples for a company she named after an ancient Italian city known for its mosaic.

“ Mom baby-sat for me a lot, and they fed me,” she said. “ I was working hard, even though it didn't look like I was. My mother would get impatient and say, ‘ Sara, when are you going to get a real job?’ ”

The wait paid off, however. McCaleb befriended the owner of an upscale tile showroom in Philadelphia, who gave her valuable advice. Within months she'd signed up six showrooms to display her designs.

She packed up her samples for a tile convention in Chicago, where - unable to afford a booth - she sat at a concession stand and showed off her work. Several conventioners stopped to admire it. Her client list grew.

In the summer of 1992, now in partnership with her younger sister, Ellen, McCaleb landed her first big order: a swimming pool border for Mrs. Smith, of Mrs. Smith's Pies. The studio expanded until several rooms of the house were stacked with marble slabs and buckets of tiles and blanketed in rock dust. Michael, by now 2, contributed to the family business by gluing tiles to the TV screen.

At about that time, McCaleb heard about a contest sponsored by New Woman magazine and the National Association of Female Executives. Top prize, to the company judged the nation's most creative new business, was \$25,000. She entered. She did not win.

She didn't dwell on it. At a 1993 convention in Miami, she and Ellen picked up 20 more showrooms. New Ravenna was now a player in the mosaic tile market: Only two other companies, one in Chicago and the other in Italy, were competition. The Chicago firm's stuff simply wasn't as skillfully crafted, and the Italian's was far more expensive. New Ravenna began turning out work for major hotels and such well-heeled, well-known families as the DuPonts.

Later that year they moved the business out of the house into a real studio, which they snared rent-free because Ellen agreed to look after the owners' four dogs and eight cats. ``We set up over there," McCaleb said, ``and hired a couple of people."

Early last year Ellen split for Texas, and McCaleb moved the business into downtown Exmore. Now struggling to keep up with orders, she hired more staff - and she got to thinking about the New Woman contest again.

``A couple days before the deadline I got in bed and on the back of photocopied New York Times crossword puzzles, wrote out what I planned to say," she said. ``I filled about six sheets."

With help from her bookkeeper, she transformed her notes into a company history. It opened: ``There have been times when I've been on the phone with a client and had to ask them to hold for a minute because the noise from a combine harvester passing by our studio window was so loud I couldn't hear a thing."

Hers was one of about 1,700 applications. She received New Woman's top prize in an October ceremony at New York's Rainbow Room, and was featured in the magazine's November issue.

These days McCaleb is wrestling with an employee handbook for her growing work force. She's designing a catalog to show off New Ravenna's original designs. She utters sentences like: ``The labor pool would be better in the city. It's hard to find people who want to work, because there's not a lot of ambition around here." She's a long way from her days as a starving artist.

With the cash from New Woman, she's been able to lease a copying machine and produce a new line of samples, as well as cover the catalog's costs.

She has no plans to move the business out of Exmore, though she figures she'll eventually need a larger building.

After all, New Ravenna is growing fast. If its expansion continues at its current rate, it'll soon be downtown Exmore's biggest employer.

ILLUSTRATION: JIM WALKER/Staff color photos

The idea for making decorative mosaic tile came to Sara McCaleb in 1991, and she borrowed money from her parents to make New Ravenna a reality. Last year she won a \$25,000 prize as the nation's most creative new business.

Photo

JIM WALKER/Staff

Sara McCaleb, owner of New Ravenna in downtown Exmore, has a staff of 12 to help her create decorative mosaic tile.

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