



PUBLICATION

Financial Post

NOV 11, 2015

HOW BEING EARLY TO A NEW CONCEPT CAN GROW A CROSS-BORDER BUSINESS

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Award-winning landscape architect and in demand speaker Virginia Burt of Burlington, Ont.-based Virginia Burt Designs has successfully built a cross-border business in a niche market she is creating by finding her passion and then finding a way to be paid to do it.

Her passion — designing spirit and healing gardens and labyrinths — has taken her across the continent and led her to open a satellite office in Ohio last year. Depending on the year and the nature of the projects, her client base is a 60/40 split between the United States and Canada with many in the healthcare space.

Burt was early to the now widely held and proven concept that nature can improve health and well-being, however, the market has caught on and as a result, she has doubled her business in the past five years.

A healing garden is an outdoor space specifically designed to meet the physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs of the people using it, to create a feeling of wellness. For example, healing gardens designed for cancer patients offer shade while still allowing daylight to improve circadian rhythms. They also must not be highly scented because the patients are more sensitive to smell.

While the benefit of her designs for hospitals, cancer and long-term care facilities are initially targeted to the patients, they also contribute to staff morale, Burt said. That's particularly true of her U.S. clients where healthcare is private. "The business case they make is that healing gardens result in improved staff retention better patient care and improved patient satisfaction reports, which makes the facility more popular. The Canadian system is a little slower to see the business case because it is public," she added.

Burt also pointed to cost savings from shorter hospital stays. "The average hospital stay in North America is 4.8 days. When you expose those people to healing gardens, that number drops by 0.41 a day. That translates into hundreds of millions of dollars in savings."

Virginia Burt Designs launched in 1996, after Burt became disillusioned with more traditional landscape architecture, and her job designing subdivisions for developers. "I realized I valued nature more than my clients did," said Burt, who grew up on an apple farm in Port Perry, Ont.

In 1996, the healing garden movement was in its infancy, few people had even heard the term. She began with residential clients and within two years had designed the first healing garden for people with HIV/AIDS in London, Ont., opened by the province's then Lieutenant Governor Hilary Weston. That was followed by a spiritual retreat in Cleveland that earned her a national award and led to a project for a cancer care facility also in Ohio.

Burt's healing gardens have resulted in her being made a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects and in November she will be made a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects. She also recently won a national award for a project called Acadia Point in Nova Scotia, in which she helped rehabilitate the last whaling camp in Canada back to nature. Burt's work and success has also made her an in-demand speaker, creating another revenue stream for her business and securing her place in a category she helped define.

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