

## Couple works to harmonize business with environment



**COORDINATORS:** Derek and Michelle Long are the coordinators of Sustainable Connections. *RACHEL E. BAYNE HERALD PHOTO*

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**Ericka Pizzillo, The Bellingham Herald**

Derek and Michelle Long searched across the globe for goods to sell to customers worldwide on the former Internet site World2Market.

Their newest endeavor is far more local.

The married couple are coordinators for Sustainable Connections, a nonprofit alliance of 180 Whatcom County businesses that make goals to work toward better environmental, workforce and community business practices.

The group is a revival of an idea started by several local business owners, including Rick Dubrow of A-1 Builders, who wanted to create a way for businesses to work together on "sustainable business practices" - reducing pollution, increasing recycling and serving the needs of the community.

"We're trying to keep money within the community and keep the economy vital with the environmental issues right out on the front end," said Chuck Robinson, owner of Village Books in Fairhaven and a board member of Sustainable Connections. "There's a triple bottom line, there's the impact on the business, the community and the environment."

The Longs met Dubrow two years ago at a forum on sustainability. Michelle Long introduced herself to Dubrow because she and her husband knew they would soon be moving fulltime from Seattle to their weekend retreat in Van Zandt.

After a dinner a few weeks later, Dubrow said the couple was exactly what Sustainable Connections needed to get jump-started.

"Some people have good ideas. Other people have really good follow through," Dubrow said. "These two can do it both."

The couple also works on contract with the state Department of Ecology on the Whatcom Watershed Pledge - which helps businesses change practices that may have polluted local waterways. They created a coupon book of local businesses to introduce people to local businesses, and held a variety of educational seminars and speakers.

"It's like sticking the engines of a 747 on a Piper Cub," Dubrow said of the couple's zest for making a go of Sustainable Connections.

### **Seeing the world**

The Longs' path to Bellingham took them around the world and throughout the country - with a stop in Seattle, where they created the Internet site from which then-President Bill Clinton made his first online purchase.

Derek Long grew up in Findlay, Ohio, and graduated from the University of Toledo. Michelle Long moved to the Dayton, Ohio, area in high school when her U.S. Air Force father was transferred to Wright Patterson Air Force Base. She graduated from Ohio's Miami University.

The couple met in a doctor's waiting room when they both worked in central Ohio as pharmaceutical sales representatives.

They both longed to leave the flat Ohio terrain and travel the world.

"I was sitting in my condo in Columbus that was set under a highway overpass and saying 'What am I doing here,'" Michelle Long said.

They saved money during their engagement and embarked on an overseas backpacking trip for their honeymoon, leaving behind their jobs.

They had plans to see some of the major cities in East Asia and Australia within six months. But the couple met other travelers who suggested they explore the rural areas in between places like Bangkok and Hong Kong. They canceled all their plane connections and extended their trip by more than a year.

"It was the decision that made all the difference," Michelle Long said.

They met local artisans and workers in India, Nepal, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, New Zealand and Australia. They saw the effects of a global economy that was shifting jobs from locally owned businesses to large, multinational companies. They saw American fast food restaurants throughout their journey.

The met metalworkers whose exquisite copper water jugs made by their families for generations were now in competition with plastic.

On a taxi ride in Indonesia, they shared the cab with some schoolgirls clutching bags of Dunkin' Donuts, which they pointed out. "You have Dunkin' Donuts in America too?" the girls asked them.

They were still unclear what their next step was when they returned to the United States and spent six months traveling the country before pulling into Seattle on a oddly sunny, warm July day that convinced them to stay.

### **Online sales**

Derek Long got a job at the Federal Reserve Bank while Michelle Long started the Masters of Business Administration program at the University of Washington.

They worked with two other students creating the business plan for World2Market to sell online the products mostly of artists in developing countries, and entered it in a contest of business students judged by some of the Seattle area's largest venture capitalist organizations.

The proposal came in second. And the venture capitalists were interested.

The Longs and their partners started World2Market in 1999 in an office in Seattle's Belltown neighborhood, just weeks before riots erupted a few blocks away during the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle.

The company had set criteria for the products it carried, such as women in decision-making roles in the business and little environmental impact. How and who created each product was described in detail on the Web site so purchasers could make their own decisions about what values they wanted to support.

Their products included soaps and candles by American Indian tribes and baskets created from fallen pine needles in a village in Nicaragua.

The company started marketing their products through retail stores, but for a variety of reasons they shut down their business and consulted on the startup of a similar online store.

Derek Long was at a conference in the Philippines where importers and retailers were finding more success trading regionally. While the Longs were helping get products across the world, the same problems were facing small U.S. businesses, whose businesses have direct influences on their communities, Long said.

"We realized there were opportunities closer to home," he said.

Their new home was Van Zandt.

### **Sustainable community**

In Whatcom County the Long's have found businesses and consumers who are supportive of the ideas behind the Sustainable Connections. They say it may be easier to convince people who live between the beauty of the water and mountains here in the county.

The organization isn't just for businesses that create environmentally friendly products or services.

"The person doesn't have to be green to be a member," Dubrow said. "All they have to do is say they'll try to do a little better each time they do something. They don't have to cost themselves out of business."

The group has also started a buying program through Northwest Computer Systems for businesses that want to buy "green" products, such as computer paper made from recycled products. Since Sustainable Connections members can purchase the products in bulk, the prices are lower.

The goal, the Longs say, is a "local living economy," which means responsible companies that are locally owned and serve the needs of the area's residents and other local businesses. Businesses should rely on local suppliers when available and area residents should depend first and foremost on local companies before going to big box stores, they say.

Keeping those dollars in the community creates solid job opportunities for other community members and keeps the local economy healthy.

"It's in your best interest to shop locally," Derek Long said. When Jeff Daffron, owner of Quicksilver Photo Lab, read about Sustainable Connections, he called immediately to become a member.

Daffron already goes a step beyond normal recycling by clipping off the two inches of film at the start of every film roll and sending it to a company so the silver in the film is recycled. He mails back film canisters to be used again in new film.

Since joining Sustainable Connections, Saffron has also joined Puget Sound Energy's green power program, which asks customers to pay extra each month for investment in alternative energy sources such as wind power.

The organization has been a way to work with other local businesses working towards similar goals in the community, he said.

"People like me who are running businesses already have their time accounted for," Daffron said. "That's one of the reasons I jumped on to (Sustainable Connections). These are things I'd love to do, but I can't because I'm too busy running my business."

Reach Ericka Pizzillo at [ericka.pizzillo@bellinghamherald.com](mailto:ericka.pizzillo@bellinghamherald.com) or call 715-2266.