

BUSINESS beat

When A Hug Is The Perfect Gift

By: Katie Kiyō



What was the inspiration for your company?

When I was laid off from my corporate sales job at the height of Michigan's worst economic crisis, I hoped no one saw me jump up from my chair and actually click my heels as I went out the door! At that moment I knew I would be putting a successful 25+ year advertising career, including being the first-ever female Detroit Sales Manager for TIME magazine and Detroit Corporate Sales Director for Meredith Corporation, behind me and embracing a new way of life – one of entrepreneurship. Although I was leaving a spectacular company surrounded by great friends and colleagues, I felt energized and eager to go in a different direction.

I went on to develop an online sympathy/remembrance gift company (www.bighugllc.com) offering unique, high-quality personalized gifts to honor special people and beloved pets who share(d) a life's journey. I named the company "Big Hug" because, to me, those two little words conveyed an expression of caring and compassion. Over time I realized the true power and capacity of "Big Hug" and extended the brand to include other meaningful life events. So today, many of our products are *also* purchased by schools, large and small businesses, and philanthropic and civic groups to honor individuals, commemorate events, or celebrate milestones – life's true memory-makers.

What were your start-up costs?

I considered them reasonable primarily for a good-looking, functional web-site, for graphics work, legal and professional fees, and a limited amount of inventory. Because many of our gifts are personalized by the artist or at the factory, we can ship straight to the customer, and eliminate some warehousing needs and business redundancies. This means that I'm able to work from a home office, which I really enjoy.

In fact, when asked how many people work for Big Hug, I usually joke and say "three" (*"me, myself, and I"*) but in truth I depend on dozens of great companies and artisans who manufacture and ship my merchandise out for me, and I couldn't do it without them.

What are your most popular gifts?

Two of our most cherished gifts on a personal level thus far have been our wind chimes – both our personalized chimes, as well as an exclusive line of remembrance chimes created especially for us by Woodstock Percussion, a well-regarded chime manufacturer. Our personalized chimes are engraved locally.

Also very popular are Tree Huggers® stainless steel custom-engraved tree dedication plaques. Tree Huggers, mounted with tension springs, are environmentally-friendly and expand as the trees grow. They can accommodate up to four lines of personalized text plus an icon. Tree Huggers are often purchased singly

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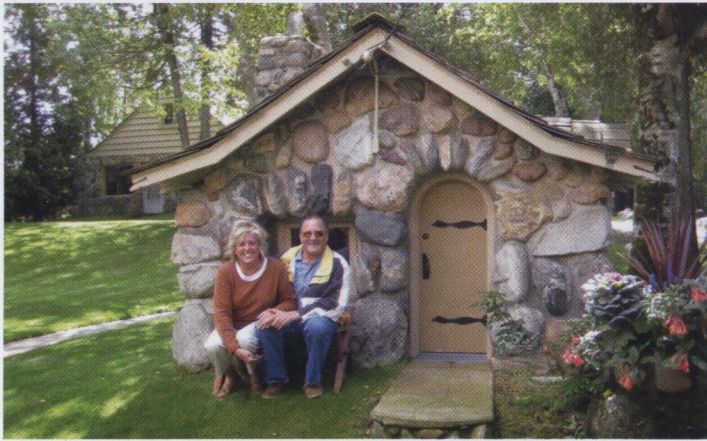
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or in larger quantities by and for individuals and families, and by parks, golf courses, Tree Cities, botanical gardens, memorial gardens, etc., to honor, commemorate, and/or celebrate something or someone. They are also often used by philanthropic and civic groups, schools, and churches for fund-raising. And what a great honor it was when Tree Huggers were placed on the newly planted trees in the 9/11 Memorial Park at Ground Zero in NYC!

Other items like personalized garden stones, garden markers, and rocks and boulders with bronze plaques are frequently sought out by individuals, and by companies and civic groups to use for a wide range of dedication purposes.

And people do love to honor their pets – present or past!

Is there seasonality to your business?

No, not really, but Mother’s Day remembrance, and the holiday time period are especially busy times for us.

Do you use social media?

Yes, I work with Emily Hay, from Birmingham, MI for her expertise in this area. Emily gave me the tools and understanding I needed to put an effective social media plan together for Big Hug.

How do you promote Big Hug?

We have been fortunate that our local, and even national news media seem to

like what we are doing! We have been featured many times in Detroit area newspapers. In addition, we have a partnership with Legacy.com, the nation’s largest repository of online obituaries. We continually seek to improve our organic search results. We use our social media tools, and invest in paid online search campaigns. Our Google “Local Places” listing also directs a surprising amount of traffic to our site. We also have an affiliate management company in place that makes it simple for us to help schools, non-profit and civic organizations with fund-raising programs.

Do any Michigan companies supply your products?

Yes, in addition to many US manufacturers, we work with several great Michigan companies that supply us with personalized markers, plaques, pet gifts and the like...and we would love to hear from other Michigan manufacturers who may be able to supply us with other relevant products and services.

What are some of your most interesting projects?

I like my job because every day brings new challenges, but I especially liked being called back to my junior high school in Ann Arbor (where I had not been for almost 40 years!) and assisting their PTO with a memory garden. Right now I’m also working with a historical society to tell the story (through plaques and markers) of a former slave who went

on to become a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Also, Big Hug was featured a recent issue of *Costco Connection*, the third largest magazine in the country, which was exciting!

What are the rewards to owning your own business?

I’m sure many business owners would simply say that the biggest reward is “being my own boss.” While that may be true for many, I would have to say that my greatest rewards are the heartfelt testimonials I receive from my customers. Ultimately, when I hear how pleased they are, or what their gift or purchase meant to a friend, family member, or community, I know I’m following the right path.

A few years ago I had no idea I’d be where I am today. Life is always a surprise! But I love my work and I feel like it’s needed in this world.

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