

La Verne Lewis: Business woman escaping the rules

A management theory, herbal recipes, Tarot-reading talent and accounting skills aim for a larger kind of balance

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

La Verne Lewis became a business woman so she could escape the rules. After punching someone else's time clock for nine years, she began to buy real estate in San Francisco. She learned accounting and did books for her friends. She moved to Portland in 1985, joined the board of A Woman's Place

Profile

Bookstore and began to think about what kind of business this community needed.

Those thoughts led eventually to Crone Magic, the shop Lewis opened nearly three years ago on Northeast Broadway. The enterprise, like her second Portland business, Cafe Mocha, is crafted in the LaVerne Lewis image of the world — a world in which the things that are meant to happen, do happen, in which signals and signs come to those who keep their eyes open.

Lewis discusses her businesses and never mentions profit margins or first-quarter earnings. When she says, "bottom line," she's talking philosophy, not dollars. Most people in business want to balance the books; Lewis aims for a larger kind of balance — the delicate blend of her grandmother's herbal recipes, her mother's Tarot-reading talents, her own accounting skills, her calm friendliness with customers.

The sense of order that fuels Lewis's approach to business extends beyond neat columns of figures ascending into black ink. In her management theory, a business is one piece of a universe that answers need with opportunity and sends up obstacles to guide people away from fruitless paths.

What all this means is that, on a typical weekday morning, La Verne Lewis, 38, shop owner and mother of a 17-year-old son, can be found at her desk (actually, a table) at Crone Magic, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, surrounded by goddess statues, moon calendars and Tarot decks. The shop is smoky-sweet with incense. The businesswoman bends over her books, in this store she has crafted after her own vision, and the magenta top of her hair catches the thin spring light.

My first business was real estate — owning and managing four Victorian houses in San Francisco, collecting rent, dealing with tenants. Then I went back to school at the age of 28 to go into computers, and found that I liked accounting. I started helping other friends I knew in San Francisco, doing their bookkeeping.

"I decided, after all my life living in San Francisco, that it was time for a change, a slower pace, semi-retirement. The cost of living here was a lot cheaper. Being a baby-boomer, I had kind of moved out of the consumer bracket. I'd already bought the color TV; I already had the Mercedes. I already owned the real estate. I decided to move someplace where I didn't have to work as hard.

"About two weeks after I was here I saw this little ad: Wanted, board members for A Woman's Place Bookstore. I volunteered at the bookstore and that spun off into being a board member. I was still working, still going to school. Being a board member gave me a desire to focus on the businesses I wanted to open and on what was needed in the community.

"Crone Magic came about because one of my good friends and I were going to school. To help with tuition we thought it would be a great idea to do a lot of the craft fairs and sell minerals and stones. I'd been collecting rocks for a long time. Our first festival was International Women's Day; we did a couple of goddess gatherings. But we got tired of lugging the rocks around.

"One day we were outside the bookstore, about 11:00 at night, and this truck pulled up and all these people got out. They were packing up in here and moving. Site unseen, we talked to the landlord, put a deposit down and we had the keys. It was like: 'Oh, shit. We're in business.'

"I started reclaiming a lot of things I'd picked up from my mother and grandmother. My grandmothers and mother, because there were not wealthy, did not use a lot of Western medicine. I remember helping my mother put mustard plasters on my brother when he was sick. We wore medicine bags in grammar school, but we hid them, because they had smelly herbs in them. We hated getting sick, because it meant my mother would give us something that was cooked in the kitchen.

"My mother always made bulk incense. She took one of our closets and converted it into a room where she did Tarot readings. People would come to our house; there were always men who were looking to be in love. She would make potions. Her form of smudging was salt in every corner. A lot of it was traditional New Orleans style, things from Santeria voodoo. She did make lots of little dolls for people who needed dolls for healing, dolls for hexing.

"Full moons were always intense around our house. New moon was kind of a light time. Usually she would get most of her customers between new moon and full moon. She would get a lot of strange customers after full moon.

"To this day my mother reads the Ouija board and says, 'You're going to get married and have kids.' She has one of those old Ouija boards with the scary pictures on it. She did have a crystal ball. She had a lot of jars with bat wings and stuff that she kept in the kitchen. There was food in one section and weird stuff in the other.

"I wasn't paying that much attention, but apparently I picked up a lot. The more I worked in the store, the more I realized. A customer would ask me something and I'd give them an answer and think, 'Where did that come from?' I automatically knew what herbs were supposed to go in pouches.

"I like the fact that it doesn't feel like work. When I come to Crone Magic, it feels like a natural part of what I'm supposed to do in this life cycle. I enjoy meeting the different people who come to the store. Someone will walk in the door and say, 'I don't know why I'm here, but I'm supposed to be here for a reason.' Or people will say, 'I've lived in this neighborhood for five years and I never saw your shop. For some reason, today I saw it and came in.' A lot of times they've discovered that they have things happening in their lives pointing them in the direction of working with earth magic.

"Or they've discovered that, working in the mainstream of life, they need to balance that by doing something in a natural sense. I've found that doing accounting and doing Crone Magic gives me that balance. Something with the hands, something with the heart, with the earth. Taking the natural ability that I think women have and balancing that with our learned traits, like typing,



accounting, being in business.

"Cafe Mocha came from Renee [LaChance] and I sitting in the hot tubs one day. We like to sit around and think of ways to make a million dollars. We were saying, wouldn't it be great to have a place where you could go and dance and have all the elements except the alcohol. We were talking about the trend of people discovering there is life after drugs and alcohol.

"One day we stumbled upon this place that had been abandoned for three years. We talked to the landlord, who gave us seven months free rent and the key. We put an ad in the paper for women to come out and help paint. We cleaned out our bank accounts and went for it.

"The emphasis was on a place for gay and lesbian people to go and have fun, and the other purpose was a place where they could go to perform that would be a lot cheaper, especially for local artists. A place where people could enjoy their talent and not pay an arm and a leg. A quaint atmosphere. A safe place.

"Crone Magic, after three years, finally supports itself. When that happened, about a year ago, it was time for Cafe Mocha. With that, like any new business, we're still putting money into it to keep it afloat.

"When things get low, for some miraculous reason, new artisans come in here with artwork that will boost sales, or a large incense order will come in. Each time I reach a crisis, I know that because the universe takes care of what is healthy and needed, something occurs in the cycle.

"In business, I've learned that when something's working, you have to detach from it and not worry. When there's a signal that you need to watch something, it will let you know. I've learned to focus on the healthy parts of the business.

"I pass that on a lot of times to other women. The law of prosperity is to concentrate on the doing and the thought, to put the money aside for the time being. If it's supposed to happen, then it will. When you start hitting obstacles, it means you're on the wrong path, that you should switch and try a different approach.

"My working mode at Cafe Mocha and at Crone Magic is that the entire group participates. You have to have the entire energy of the whole to be successful. It's very important that you participate with your staff as opposed to separating yourself and saying, 'I am the boss.'

"I also believe that when you have a crisis in a business, you share. Often the ideas you can't even think of come from someone else. I have found that's one of the predominant reasons why both places have been successful. Being a sole proprietor with a consensus attitude. Looking at the whole. That theory comes from the planet. There's no one here by themselves sitting on earth; we're all here collectively."



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