



## Haida/Kwakwakw'wakw Artist and Business Owner, Nalaga

By: Christina Coolidge | Indigenous Program Researcher

Nalaga Designs offers a unique array of cedar bark weavings, two dimensional designs, limited edition prints, trade bead jewelry and clothing and accessories by Haida/Kwakwakw'wakw artist Nalaga (Avis O'Brien). Cedar bark weaving and carving has been part of the culture of the peoples of the Northwest Coast for thousands of years; it was and continues to be an integral part of the culture. Avis dedicates her days to preserving her culture by continuing on with the work of her ancestors.

Nalaga's two dimensional designs, paintings and carvings are a way for her display the lineage and history of her people. They embody the power and beauty of her ancestors and those of the supernatural world in which her people originate. Her jewelry, baskets and hats represent an important continuation of the ancient legacy of Northwest Coast woven adornment. Nalaga fuses age-old techniques with modern style to create products that can be shared with the world.



Nalaga also brings together history, tradition and fashion with her ancient trade bead jewelry. Her jewelry tells the story of the fur trade that took place on the Northwest Coast during first contact. The ancient energy in her jewelry can be felt when wearing the pieces.

Nalaga also offers weaving workshops where participants can learn about the cultural and spiritual importance of cedar bark weaving as well as technical skills.

Nalaga is apprenticing under Master Haida carver, Jay Simeon. She is learning designing, painting, repose, metal engraving and carving from Jay. She respects the gift of Haida art that she has been given from her ancestors and will protect it so it can be passed onto the next generations.



### **Where did the idea come from?**

Well there are two parts to this answer. where the art came from, which is what my business is based on, and the idea for making a business out of the art.

The art form is a gift that I have recovered from my ancestors. My introduction to the magical treasures of the Northwest Coast started when I learned to weave from my older sister, Meghann O'Brien. This was the beginning of my journey to where I am now embracing the richness of my cultural heritage and creating jewelry and artwork that reflects the beauty of Northwest Coast Native design.



I am a carver, weaver, painter, designer and jeweler. I started my company, Nalaga Designs in 2013 as a way to share the cultural

knowledge and elegance of cedar bark weaving with the world. Cedar bark weaving has been my connection to the rich legacy of the Haida and Kwakw'wakw, and has also been a doorway for me to pursue other art forms.

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I have had many teachers who have helped me on my path including Master Haida weaver Meghann O'Brien, my older sister. I have been apprenticing with Master Haida Carver, Jay Simeon, learning the foundations of Haida design, painting and carving. I have also worked with Master Kwakw'wakw carvers Beau Dick and Bruce Alfred.

The actual idea of creating a business out of my art came from my boyfriend at the time, Barry Ross. He is a business owner and a web designer. He suggested the idea to me, built me an online store and the rest is history!

### **Have you done any post-secondary?**

Yes I have done 3 semesters of post secondary. I was studying Aboriginal Studies at Langara College. I had a lot of ideas of what I wanted to do with my life, all of which were centred around helping my people to have a different experience at life. I thought about social work, nursing and counselling before I realized that I needed to follow my heart and pursue a career in art.



### **How did you get the business started?**

My business started with just selling cedar woven jewelry. After Barry built me the website I started doing craft fairs. I never really sold a lot at those events but I gave out a lot of business cards and made a lot of connections. I had a lot of people help me in the beginning. My friend Evelyn Gironde help me with graphic design work that needed to be for my marketing posters and business cards. Skylar Stock, a good friend offered to sell my cedar jewelry in his store, and also commissioned my first woven basket. I am very grateful for the wonderful network I have in my life who were there to help me get things up and going.

Things just started to grow from there. About a week after leaving langara to pursue a career in art I got offered an apprenticeship with Master Haida carver, Jay Simeon.

### **How do you find new clients?**

By putting myself out there and networking with people. I went to a lot of craft fairs and that was a great way to get my work out there. I no longer attend craft fairs, as I am transitioning into doing fine art rather than craft, and I feel very excited about this! It is a step in the direction I want to be going in

### **Are you able to live off your earnings or do you supplement your income in other ways? If so, how?**

I supplement my earning with grants from the government. Canada offers many grants for Aboriginal artists, as they should. Due to government policies and laws it was illegal to create our art or have anything to do with our culture, and as a result a lot was lost. I think the government should pay artists for rebuilding our cultures.

### **What are the greatest rewards of owning your own business?**

I can't describe the feeling to have found my path in life. I was lost for many years, not knowing what direction to go in. Now I know in my heart that I am doing what I am meant to do and I get paid for it. On top of that I get to be part of ensuring the preservation of my culture.

### **What are the greatest challenges?**

I struggle with the financial part. I have gone into a bit of debt because I am not making a lot of money, but I trust that the money is on the way! The universe always provides when we are on the right path . I have a number of really well paying jobs coming up that I am looking forward to. I also struggle with the accounting side of my business. I dread the end of the

month.

**What are some of the challenges you've faced as a woman in business?**

Being a woman in a male dominated profession, carving, is intimidating. I have been told that women are not strong enough to carve, as it is very hard on your body. But I did not let that get in my way of moving forward with my goals and visions.

**What are your dreams for your business and for yourself?**

My dreams are to become an Internationally renowned Haida / kwakwakw'wakw carver and travel the world sharing my art with others. I want to be completely self sustaining and have a large audience of people who collect my art.

**How has owning your own business affected your life?**

It has completely changed my life for the better. I spend more time working and less time with friends and socializing than I did before I started my business, but it is worth it. I work about 70 hours a week compared to 40 hours a weeks at my previous job. But it is all stuff I love. I am building a foundation for the rest of my life.

**Has owning your own business changed the way you feel about yourself?**

I have more confidence and self esteem. I always knew I was capable, but now I have proof.

**For more information or to contact Nalaga:**

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Photos provided by: Kameko Walker



Christina Coolidge is currently attending SFU as a Communications Major. She is the Indigenous Program Researcher with the Career Services department. Christina is a member of the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation and her matrilineal ancestry includes Cree and Scottish. She hopes to help build a bridge between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous communities in order to better understand one another and to live together in a spirit of unity.

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