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Planet Organic founder built success from ground up

Turned a single store into a major chain

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Mark Craft has come a long way from that little log cabin in the Peace Country to be one of the founders of a company with annual sales of \$100 million.

The long mane of hair is gone but he says he's the same guy who moved to Alberta from the United States more than 30 years ago to get back to the land and live a "conserver" lifestyle.

Craft is the co-founder of Planet Organic, which started with a little health-food store on Whyte Avenue and has recently been in the business news headlines.

Now listed on the Toronto stock market's Venture Exchange, Planet Organic has grown from a single Edmonton store to a healthy corporation with eight outlets across Canada, as well as 50 Sangster's Health Centre outlets, seven Healthy's outlets plus Trophic Canada which manufactures natural supplements.

Since 2001 the gross sales have climbed to an estimated \$100 million this year from \$1.6 million. That's a lot of lentils, granola, organic plums and Rhodiola caplets.

And there's a sweet irony that a company founded by someone who came here from Detroit because he couldn't stand Richard Nixon just took over an 11-store American chain called Mrs. Green's Natural Market Inc.

Craft, who now lives in Victoria, says he isn't surprised at how he has ended up being an extremely successful capitalist after spending most of his adult life working for alternative causes.

"It's not so amazing. You wouldn't have predicted it 10 years ago, I guess. Now I'm doing the same kind of work in a corporate environment ... We try to maintain this stuff and do good in a different kind of business environment.

Craft's personal history is not what you would expect from an executive vice-president.

He moved to the Fairview area in 1974, built a cabin with hand tools and connected up with the Canadian Conserver Group, which distributed wood stoves to about 10 stores across Canada.

He also went into retail business in Fairview, opening the New Country Store in Fairview, which sold food, books and wood stoves.

He soon became a fixture in the environmentalist community and that brought him to politics.

At a time when environmental issues were far below the radar, he was organizing conferences at Fairview College on subjects such as alternative energy and energy-efficient construction, and became involved with the Green Party of Canada at its formation.

He ran the campaign of Peace River candidate Marion Loring, who picked up 578 votes in a strongly Conservative riding in the 1984 federal election.

He was also tight with provincial NDP Leader Grant Notley, and worked on his campaigns. After Notley died in an air crash on Oct. 19, 1984, Craft ran a successful byelection campaign for Jim Gurnett. He then moved to Edmonton to become Gurnett's executive assistant.

Gurnett says Craft had the kind of analytical talent that is important for politics as well as business.

"He could look at a whole situation, see all the pieces and understand how they fit together," Gurnett says. "I really appreciated a lot of his insights."

Gurnett is not surprised at Craft's business success, saying he was never laid back but always combined a good eye for opportunity with an endless capacity for work.

After Gurnett lost his seat, Craft decided to change his path again. He teamed up with Peter Amerongen, who was building energy-efficient homes and has recently received national recognition for his abilities.

Craft says he was never good with a hammer, but he was good at running the business end.

"I liked being part of creating something I thought was wonderful even though I wasn't much of a creator but I facilitated the creators."

He also came to realize that building R-2000 houses did a lot more for the environment than living in a little cabin and driving the 40 kilometres to Fairview every day.

He eventually got into the organic grocery business with his partner Diane Shaskin when Terra Health Foods on Whyte Avenue, which had been the High Level Co-op in an earlier incarnation, came up for sale in 1995. A few years later, they moved the store a couple of blocks south where it is now the flagship of the chain.

Craft and Shaskin realized that the health-food industry was made up of 1,500 independent businesses and nobody had a strategy for when they were leaving the business.

They took the company public in 2001. The new acquisitions started in 2002 with the Victoria store and the growth started in earnest. While the plan was originally to grow through acquisition, most of the new Planet Organic markets were new stores.

Yes, life has changed for Craft and Shaskin. They live in the posh Oak Bay area of Victoria instead of near the North Saskatchewan River. And the biggest change is their six-year-old son Alexandre whom they adopted in Vietnam six years ago.

But he says the business, as big as it is getting, still has the same positive principles, even if it needs help from financial consultants. "It doesn't feel any different. We still have the same team we had at the one store -- we're just doing different jobs now ... You can be honest and good and still be successful."

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