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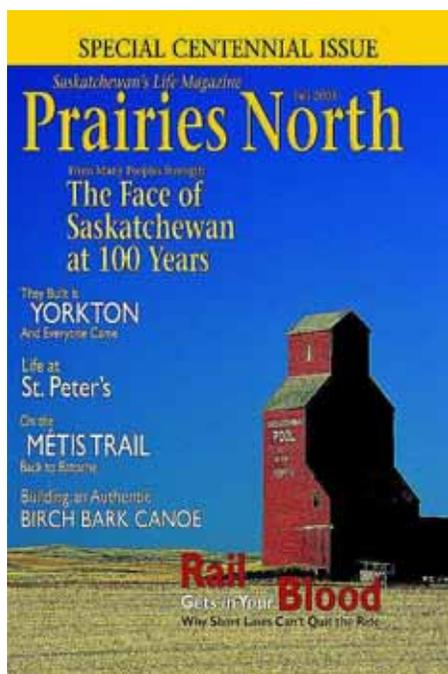
# Sharing SBLA Success Stories

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Pelly Small Business Loans Co-operative Ltd.

September House Publishing Inc.

Michelle and Lionel Hughes



The rented Macintosh computer looked slightly out of place in the farmhouse kitchen that belonged to Michelle and Lionel Hughes, and it left no room on the table for a family meal. The only thing that mattered to the Norquay couple in the fall of 1998, though, was figuring out how to get that machine to produce a magazine ready to compete with the likes of *National Geographic*. *Prairies North: Saskatchewan's Life Magazine* is the publication that was launched from that kitchen table and today can be found sitting next to *National Geographic* on newsstands across Canada.

“We knew we were being ambitious,” says Michelle, “but we knew also that if we were going to produce a full-colour, picture-filled magazine all about Saskatchewan, it was going to have to be of very high quality. If we expected people to buy our publication when they could compare it with excellent magazines like *Canadian Geographic* or *Beautiful British Columbia*, we had to be at least as good.”

That was no mean feat for a couple who had moved to Saskatchewan to try their hand at raising animals and specialty crops. Neither had publishing experience, and even the whirring Macintosh computer was entirely new to them.

“Perhaps our inexperience worked to our benefit,” says Lionel. “We forged ahead and asked people questions and got the first issue out in October 1998. We can look back now and see huge progress in our ability and vast improvement in what we are publishing today. But getting that first issue off the press was the key. We were invested in the project financially and personally. Turning back was never a real option, even when it looked impossible to go forward.”

The magazine has just finished its seventh year, which makes it a success story in small magazine publishing. Almost 80 per cent of new small magazines fail in their first year. Getting past the five-year mark is considered a big achievement in the industry. *Prairies North* has won several national magazine awards and one international award.

“We were blessed with some real advantages working in Norquay,” says Michelle. “For the first three years, we worked out of our farm home and did everything ourselves. We managed to operate with almost no overhead and kept our operating expenses to a minimum. The

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availability of small business support programs like the Pelly Small Business Loans Co-operative Ltd. was really important when we needed equipment in the early stages of the business.”

The company now employs six full-time positions, as well as a number of part-time and casual positions. In 2002, the couple bought a building in the town of Norquay and renovated it for office space. The magazine’s circulation has grown, and the company estimates that more than 80,000 people will see each issue.

“Of course, we remain very ambitious about the work we do,” says Lionel. “We want to double what we are doing right now. Our approach has not changed much since we began. We still keep a close eye on our expenses, and try to make the best use of new technological or financial tools that can help us operate more efficiently.

“We have excellent staff that understand our unique vision, and have also invested a lot of their energy and commitment to the success of the magazine.”

“We are very grateful for the opportunity we have been given, to be able to contribute to the people’s sense of pride in our province through the magazine,” says Michelle.