Pam and her family have called North Pole, Alaska their home for over 30 years and as Pam states, "Living in Santa's hometown has brought many unique experiences, ongoing adventures, and a measure of good, old-fashioned fun!"

Pam is a member of the North Pole Chamber of Commerce, Made in Alaska, Buy Alaska, and the Alaska Travel Industry Association. For nearly three years she was a Services Excellence Volunteer at Fairbanks Memorial Hospitality. Pam is also a member of the Golden Key National Honor Society.

Santa's Letters and Gifts was founded in 2002, and since that time Pam has been on a mission to create excitement and joy for kids, teens and adults, personalized with an Alaskan touch. Her company specializes in sending high quality Santa Letter Packages and unique gifts from North Pole, Alaska.

I recently had a conversation with Pam at McCafferty’s Coffee House, another fine local business, to find out more about Santa’s Letters and Gifts and what drives her as an entrepreneur.

**Mark:** What made you decide to pursue entrepreneurship and why Santa’s Letters and Gifts?

**Pam:** Prior to opening my business I worked for a number of years in the travel industry. In the late 90’s there was a decline in the industry due to more people using the internet to book their travel.
On the other hand, I had small children at home and a passion for Santa and all things Christmas. What better place to combine my passion with the ability to stay at home with my kids.

**Mark:** It is ironic that the threat of the internet caused a decline in the travel industry, but created opportunities for you to pursue an e-commerce business. Speaking of e-commerce, who and where are your customers?

**Pam:** I have customers in Alaska, all over the lower 48 and across the globe. I have customers from England, Ireland, Australia, Germany, Greece, Azerbaijan, Malta, Brazil and Vietnam.

**Mark:** How much of your business is repeat customers?

**Pam:** A significant amount, I don’t have a specific number, but it is over 75% and maybe as high as 80%.

**Mark:** Wow that is impressive. That definitely speaks to the importance of building and maintaining relationships in today’s business environment. Given that your business is largely e-commerce, how do you build and maintain these relationships?

**Pam:** I reach out to my customers through seasonal newsletters and social media.

**Mark:** What are some of your greatest challenges as entrepreneur?

**Pam:** Operating a business offers many challenges. Keeping up with technology is certainly a challenge, particularly since my business relies on e-commerce. When I first started this business I knew very little about building websites and conducting business over the internet. I took a few courses over the years at UAF that helped me with the technical aspects, but largely it has been through research, keeping up with trends and hard work. However, one of the cool things of having an e-commerce business is spending my time with the family or going to the grocery store and then coming home and seeing what sales my efforts have brought in. Another challenge is having new ideas for the business. I create my own designs and packages and try to deliver what I think my customer might want. I have grown my product lines over the years from focusing on letters from Santa to offering poems from Robert Service, “Bard of the Yukon,” printed on our exclusive Gold Rush stationary.

**Mark:** I suppose running a home-based e-commerce business can also result in a feeling of isolation.

**Pam:** Absolutely. I don’t get the face-to-face interaction of a brick and mortar store. I sell some of my products at gift shops in Alaska, and at the Chamber Visitor’s Cabin in North Pole. Sometimes I take part in bazaars or events such as the recent “Women in Business” event held by the Dynamic Divas and hosted at UAFs Community and Technical College.

**Mark:** Speaking of the Dynamic Divas, can you tell me a bit more about that organization?

**Pam:** Dynamic Divas was started by a couple of local female business women with the goal of making connections and creating networks. The recent “Women in Business” event was the first one, bringing in nearly 50 women owned business.
**Mark:** Yes, I and other faculty members of the Applied Business department attended the event. I must say we were all thoroughly impressed with the entrepreneurial spirit and enthusiasm that was exhibited that day. I hope this event continues on into the future. It is a great opportunity for CTC and local businesses to collaborate with one another.

**Mark:** Speaking of CTC, you hold two degrees from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. An Associate of Applied Science in Applied Business with a concentration in Entrepreneurship and an Associate of Applied Science in Accounting. I should also mention that you were a Magna Cum Laude graduate in both degrees, kudos to you! How has your education and courses you have taken at UAF CTC and on main campus assisted you with your business? Also, who have been some of the faculty members that have made a difference?

**Pam:** Working and completing my AAS degrees has been very beneficial to my success. Particularly courses like Excel, Contemporary Management Issues, Introduction to Business, Small Business Planning, Managing a Small Business and Marketing. These courses laid a solid business foundation. Other courses that have been helpful have been Fundamentals of Oral Communication and Political Economy, as well as taking workshops through the Small Business Development Center and Professional Development courses at UAF CTC such as Web Design and Adobe Photoshop. I took a number of upper division courses on main campus, such as Web design, graphic design, Digital photography and Typography that have also helped me tremendously. As far as faculty members that have made a difference, Charlie Dexter for sure. His enthusiasm was inspirational for me and he convinced me that I should open my own business. I have also benefited greatly from Jean Heusinkvled’s Excel course and Herb Kuss’s Contemporary Management Issues course.

In closing, are there any recommendations, suggestions or encouragements you might give to people that might want to start a business?

Having your own business is rewarding and also a lot of fun, and I love the creative freedom it has allowed me to pursue, but it is also hard work. Plan on lots of hard work with no paycheck, do your research, keep current with trends. Also, planning and maintaining a budget is critical, and plan on not making a profit for three to five years.

The Applied Business Department thanks Pam for taking the time to share her story. If you want more information about our programs please contact us at 907-455-2852 or uaf-abus@alaska.edu.