

Kim Siegenthaler

The Unexpected Business Owner

Kim Siegenthaler never expected to own a business. “I always thought I was going to be a really good employee.” Yet Kim is Principal Landscape Architect and co-owner of Jensen Belts Associates, one of Boise’s most recognizable landscape architecture, site planning, and urban design firms. A self-described reluctant entrepreneur and cautious risk taker, she has built a business on her love of design and her relationships with her customers.

From Forensics to Landscape Architecture

Inspired by her mother’s job working at the Boise Police Department and detective shows on television, Kim initially pursued a career in forensics and chemistry at the University of Idaho. She changed her mind after spending a summer working at the Sherriff’s department. “I worked in records. My job was entering sex offenders into the database every day and having to answer calls. I learned that a job in the law enforcement field just wasn’t for me.”

Kim switched majors after her first semester in college and

turned to a career in landscape architecture. “Plants and horticulture had always interested me. I remember going to Butchart Gardens in British Columbia when I was in junior high. I fell in love with that place. My dad was always in the arts, and so with that influence I gravitated towards the creative side of learning. Landscape Architecture was the perfect balance between art and science”.

It was an immediate fit. Kim spent summers working at FarWest Landscape + Garden.

“It was an incredible experience. I worked in the nursery, and so I didn’t do a lot of design, but I learned all of my plant material. It became an important advantage for me. There are a lot of outstanding landscape architects out there who don’t know their plant material.” By the time that Kim graduated in 1999, she had a solid base of academic and practical experience.

She interviewed with all of the notable landscape architecture firms in town hoping to land her first full-time

landscape architecture position and found it with Jensen Belts Associates. “I got a call on a Sunday from Eric Jensen of Jensen Belts. He offered me a job and wanted me to start the next day. The other firms I interviewed with were disappointed they didn’t have send me an offer in time, but it was fate. I was very, very thankful Eric called when he did. Jensen Belts Associates was the perfect fit”.

Apprenticeship to Ownership

Kim joined Jensen Belts Associates as an intern Landscape Architect. Eric Jensen and Don Belts were the Principal Partners. Bruce Taylor, who eventually became a successor Principal Partner with Kim, had joined the firm five or six years earlier. The team quickly became an extended family of sorts.

“Don and Eric were amazing owners to me as an employee. When I was starting a family,

I was afforded three months maternity leave with Ben in 2005 and another three months with Catie in 2008—both times with full pay and benefits. That doesn’t happen ever, but they were willing to do that for me even at the height of the recession in 2008.”

They also gave Kim training and guidance. “Eric was a tough mentor. There were a lot of employees before me who did not like his demanding style. He knew how he wanted things done, and he reviewed everything with a red pencil and a fine-tooth comb. I quickly learned how he wanted things done, and because of that we got along very well. My work style and work ethic are very similar to his. Over time I gained his trust. Eric made a point of including me in all the planning meetings. I learned an incredible amount from him.”

Kim’s relationship with Don was completely different but equally influential. “Don was the artistic, personal side of the business. He was the relationship guy. He gave me a lot of responsibility early on and was quick to hand over clients and projects. Having that experience and responsibility was really important. In a company as small as ours, you have to wear a lot of hats. You better know how to write a proposal and deal with the

business side of things. Plus make sure you are getting the profit you need when you’re doing this work and billing out at a rate so you can keep the doors open. I was fortunate to have a window into that side of the business early on.”

Kim reflects she’s a robust blend of both of her mentors. “I’m kind of a good blend between both Eric and Don. I tend to be more detail oriented like Eric, but I also think I have great rapport with clients like Don”..”

It hasn’t always been easy as a woman in a male-dominated industry. “It was never difficult being

a woman at Jensen Belts Associates. They always treated me like I was an equal. But being out on the job site can be a different story. To this day I will often get called sweetie or sweetheart or honey. I know it is a term of endearment for many men of an older generation, but it can chip away at my credibility or the authority I have at the site.” She responds by biting her tongue and focusing on the project at hand.

“Relationships are so important,” she says. Whether it’s working with clients or colleagues on the job site, Kim has a simple philosophy. “I believe the key is being really responsive. When people contact me or send me an email, I respond imme-

diately. Clients always tell me how grateful they are. I think it makes a big difference.”

Over time, Kim’s responsibilities and success grew. At the same time, Don and Eric grew closer to retiring. The path to leadership was always in the back of Kim’s mind, but she didn’t give it a lot of thought. “I always imagined they would either going to shut the door and I would be looking

for a new job, or Bruce Taylor and I would eventually be their successors.”

When the time came, ownership wasn’t an automatic decision. “When Eric and Don got to a point

where they wanted to retire, Bruce and I had to decide if we wanted to buy them out or to close up shop and find new jobs. We could have said ‘Thanks, but no thanks’ but we were excited about building on to the Jensen Belts name and legacy. We didn’t want to create all that from scratch.”

While it wasn’t a decision Kim could have predicted, she knew it was the right decision at the time. “So many things happened for me to be able to take this leap. We have such a great relationship with Eric and Don, and I have an

“Kim has built a business on her love of design and her relationship with her customers.”



incredible relationship with Bruce, too. I don't know I would have done this as a sole owner. Bruce is an ideal business partner for me. I know if I'm ever in a jam, Bruce will be there for me. And I think it is what I want and need in a business partner. Neither of us are power hungry people; we're 50/50, and we like to keep it that way. We don't disagree about much, and we know we can count on each other. It's the kind of safety net that I want in a business relationship."

Kim also recognizes the contribution of her family's support. Matt, her husband of 19 years, is also in architecture. "He gets what I do. I'm so lucky to have a spouse who can commiserate and understand what I'm going through when I have a deadline or working with demanding clients." Beyond his empathy, Kim says Matt is a partner who is willing to pick up the slack. "He's amazing. When we bought out Don and Eric, we walked into some big commitments. He's supportive of that responsibility. It's not easy to have a small business owner as a spouse, but he's incredibly supportive."

It's similar to the support she has from her mentors, Don and Eric. "You know those guys have been like fathers to me. Just incredible." To this day, Kim's mentors play an

important role in her life. Don and his wife, Rita, who live across the street from Kim, which makes the bond even closer and part of the family. Kim's children think of Don as a grandfather. "We started calling Don 'OMB' (pronounced Omby) which stood for 'Old Man Belts.' It was a joke in the beginning; we said 'oh, you're going to be the oldest guy on the block,' but it's become this term of endearment. My kids still call him Omby and even Don's own grandkids call him Omby!"

Right-sizing and Risk-taking

Kim learned a lot from her mentors, but some of the most important lessons, she says, were lessons about business. "I never thought I would be a business owner, so I never had any formal business training in school. I still wonder sometimes: Am I doing this right?" Eric and Don provided plenty of guidance along the way. "They always taught me as a business owner to, first and foremost, pay my taxes. They had seen outstanding architects, who were great at their profession, mess up their business by not saving for taxes. They were always reminding Bruce and I to put money away during the good times because, due to the cyclical nature of the economy, the rainy days are always right around the corner."

Saving for tighter times is a lesson Kim learned from her parents too, and she's fortunate she and her partner, Bruce, have similar philosophies when it comes to financial security and risk-taking.

Kim considers her risk adversity to be one of her strengths. "I've been

in the business long enough I can literally map out the roller coaster of economic highs and lows. Landscape Architecture rides that roller coaster too. Right now we're definitely at a high, and we're trying to make hay while the sun shines. There's a lot of business out there, but it isn't going to last forever."

As a business women, one of the most difficult things to navigate is the optimal business size and determining the point at which you hire more staff so you can grow the client base. It's particularly challenging for Kim, who is mindful about her risk adversity but equally mindful of how she wants to spend her time. "I could hire more people and grow, but then my role switches from landscape architect to business development. It is a difficult thing for me. I set out to be a landscape architect, and I want to be a landscape architect. I tend to hold projects close to me. I know I could hand them off to an employee, but it is the work I love and get excited about doing."

Evolving

Kim embraces the change and evolution of the firm. It's one of the things she likes most about Landscape Architecture. "You know, one thing about the physical landscape is that it's ever evolving. It's not static like a building.

Trees grow, they die, plantings need to be replaced. Parks and outdoor spaces have changing uses. Now there's pickleball and lacrosse, but 30 years ago nobody knew what those were. Today as we design urban parks downtown it is essential to include free Wi-Fi centers because those are amenities people have come to expect".

Kim uses Julia Davis and Ann Morrison, two of Boise's oldest parks, as examples. "Julia Davis and Ann Morrison parks were built before there was a lot of vehicle traffic, but the car has changed the parks dramatically. Today traffic design and connectivity is much more important. A redesign can create much better movement throughout the park and include new uses so people can enjoy the space year-round."

Kim has worked on some of Boise's most well-known landmarks. Early in her career, Kim contributed to the projects ranging from the Basque Block in downtown Boise, Micron, Idaho Shakespeare Festival on Warm Springs, Idaho Botanical Garden Master Plan, Meridian's Kleiner Park, and the Idaho Capital Building.

More recently, she and her team collaborated with other firms on large-scale projects like JUMP and the Esther Simplot Park. While a Denver-based firm created the master plans for the Esther

Simplot Park, Jensen Belts Associates was brought in as the local consultant for the planting and irrigation design for the 55 acre site next to the Boise River. Kim is currently working on Phase II of the adjacent Whitewater Park project that will allow for more whitewater events in the river. Kim takes incredible pride in contributing to the Greenbelt park system and the remediation of the area next to the Boise River. "It's just amazing how Boise City and the Simplot family were willing and able to clean up that park site. The ground was so spoiled, and it cost a significant amount to repair. In my opinion, it was money so well-spent. It's another gem in Boise's Ribbon of Jewels along the Boise River".

Having worked on so many of Boise's notable parks and urban projects, Kim regularly sees reflections of her handiwork. Given her commitment, and deep roots to the Boise area, it fills her with pride and satisfaction. After almost 20 years as a Landscape Architect, she enjoys seeing the fruits of her labor throughout the city.

In some ways, it connects her to her late father who was also an artist. "My Dad was a painter and ceramic artist with very recognizable work. He was commissioned to do a huge mural for Morrison Knudsen in the 1980s. Years later, I was working with the civil engineering firm McMullen Jacobs Associates on the Esther Simplot Park project. I walked into the building and there was my Dad's mural. I recognized it immediately. I remember him been working on it in our basement for months when I was a kid. It was an amazing feeling to see

it again after all those years."

Every so often Kim sees one of her Dad's paintings or collages someplace when she least expects it. It's a gift Kim treasures and the same gift she hopes to give to her kids, with her landscape designs throughout the Treasure Valley.