



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844 • SATURDAY, JULY 17, 1999

SECTION D

FOCUS & BOOKS

Take this job and shove it

This is not a dress rehearsal. This is it. That's why so many of us cherish a desire to escape the choices we've made and follow our dreams. Changing jobs is a start. But as Salem Alaton reports, it also helps to have a whole new state of mind.

JANNA SYLVEST

Age: 35

Lives: Vancouver

Previously: tax lawyer

Now: co-owner of a sex-toy store

Janna Sylvest was always a brainy idealist. She still sounds serious, precise and purposeful. Five years ago, she was a lawyer using tax legislation to benefit native communities. Now, she's a partner in Womyns'Ware Inc., a Vancouver shop dedicated to female sexuality. What intervened between those two pursuits was a year of treatment and recovery from uterine cancer.

"I did a lot of self-examination at that time," says Ms. Sylvest of her 1994 watershed. "It sounds strongly worded now, but the practice of law, and how adversarial it was, was killing me. I needed to do something that had a strong focus on me as an individual and not just helping others."

Having been a top law student at the University of British Columbia, Ms. Sylvest was invited to article, and then remain, at the power firm McCarthy Tetrault. She hung in for 18 months, working with corporate clients, but "I had to leave the firm if I was going to switch sides," the other side being society's have-nots.

Her chance came with a small law firm where

she could dedicate herself to First Nations groups, creating new economies on the reserves by "skating your way through legislation and using it in a way that it wasn't intended."

Ms. Sylvest took on provincial governments and had cases go to the Supreme Court. But legal work was grinding her down — particularly her experience of male aggression.

"I never once travelled as a lawyer where I wasn't sexually approached by one or more of the men who were involved" in the trial or conference, she says. The slow progress of the legal system also got to her: "Maybe I'm too impatient for how long it takes and what it costs and what you've gained."

Her uterine tumour triggered a complete reassessment. With Ms. Sylvest's undergrad commerce degree, running a feminist business seemed attractive. Women's bookstores were already going strong. What about women's sexual lives? As a lesbian, Ms. Sylvest had reflected on that subject extensively. Now, she was fighting a



Janna Sylvest (right) with partner Otter Louis. Income from her business is unlikely to rival her earnings as a lawyer. Money 'was certainly not a motivation,' she says.

disease that assailed the female sex organs. What stronger, more heartening counterattack than a business celebrating female sexuality?

Womyns'Ware, created in 1995 with partner Otter Louis, is a store for sex toys, accessories and guidance, and most of its products are actually created by women. The business "is about women's sexuality being distinct from men's," Ms. Sylvest says.

Womyns'Ware has drawn a growing customer base over its four years, but even though Ms. Sylvest does some part-time legal work, the business is unlikely to soon bring her anything like the six-figure income McCarthy Tetrault would have happily been paying her by now. Money, how-

ever, "was certainly not a motivation at all," says Ms. Sylvest.

She feels blessed that her family understands. Ms. Sylvest says her engineer father, who diligently pursued community service, and her mother, who overcame gender obstacles to become a top pharmaceutical researcher, have always been role models.

"I had a very supportive and liberal family," she says, "with very positive sexual information."