

2024 Cando Economic Developer
of the Year Award Winner:
Individual Category:
Indigenous Private Sector
Business Winner

Kaska Dena Designs

Natasha Peter

My name is Natasha Peter. I am a mother to a beautiful 6-year-old baby girl whom I'm proudly teaching Dena ways. I am a member of the Wolf Clan, as is my daughter. My family history line is Kaska, Northern Tutchone, Tlingit, and Scottish, a long line of strong people.

I am from the Kaska Dena lands of Ross River, Yukon, where I was raised with a deep appreciation for traditional ways of life. My grandmothers, Mary and Tootsie Charlie, gave me the name Gwensellia, which means Moose Skin Scrapper, a name that reflects the value our culture places on hard work. Growing up, I learned important skills like hunting, harvesting, sewing, and beading from my family and community, as well as from the Elders who shared their knowledge and wisdom with me. Their teachings have had a profound impact on who I am today and continue to inspire me in my work.

When I was a little girl, I began sewing, especially during my Kaska Dena language classes. As an adult, before I began Kaska Dena Designs, I had a full-time job in the mining industry in the Yukon. During this time, I was working in mining camps. I would go to the camp for 3-4 weeks at a time and began to lose interest in my culture. I decided to quit my work in mining and started to work for an Indigenous store in Whitehorse. I began to get back into sewing. It was healing for me before I realized it was. I had a passion for making crafts when I was younger and eventually began

a home business, Creative Dena Designs, in 2017. In my spare time, I fell in love with creating again. As time went on, my sewing and creative work began to heal me, and I just kept creating. When my home business, Creative Dena Designs, began to grow, I created a group page on Facebook, and that helped to grow my customer base Canada-wide. I began designing, manufacturing, and selling clothing and accessories through Facebook and in-person events. In 2022, I wanted to do this work as a full-time job, and that is when I established Kaska Dena Designs to reflect my First Nation and where I was raised. I had my first art exhibit in Whitehorse and began going to fashion shows. Next, I became an international designer. I was featured on runways in NY, Paris. Seeing people light up through my artwork feeds my passion for what I do. With a passion for honouring cultural traditions and a deep appreciation for the natural world, I am an artist and designer who creates unique clothing that celebrates our heritage and supports independent artists.

I draw inspiration from the land that heals, nourishes, and inspires us. We harvest a lot of raw materials from the land during the fall season and source supplies from people in our community, helping each other grow. I infuse each piece with warmth, colours, and peace. When I create, I channel a place of calmness and creativity, always keeping in mind the lessons and wisdom passed down by those who have taught me what I know to be true. My designs reflect the fighting spirit and strength of my grandparents, and I sew memories of those I love into every piece. The result is clothing that imbues its wearers with confidence, pride, and beauty. My work also represents a commitment to preserving cultural traditions and providing a legacy that future generations can appreciate and protect.

In my business, I provide high-quality, one-of-a-kind clothing that embodies the values of creativity, authenticity, and respect for cultural heritage. By supporting me as an independent artist, my customers are not only acquiring unique clothing that celebrates our heritage but they are also investing in the preservation and celebration of our culture

When I create, it comes from the place of honouring those who have taught me what I know to be true. Kaska Dena Design's Mission Statement is:

"The land heals us, nourishes us, and inspires us; it is our home. To be inspired by the environment is to see the natural beauty it offers us and reflect its warmth, colours, and peace for us to appreciate once more.

When I create, it comes from the heart. A place of calmness, creativity, and love for my culture. The strength and fighting spirit of my grandparents are what give my work its unique beauty. As I sew, memories of those I love are stitched in every piece I make. When they wear the clothing I make, my customers feel the confidence, pride, and beauty that my grandparents have taught. This is what makes my clothes so unique.

When I create, it is not only about me. It is also about providing a legacy that appreciates and protects the traditions that have defined me and my ancestors. In celebrating my culture, I can pass it down to future generations. When my customers wear my designs, they support me as an independent artist. This means providing for my daughter and myself."

One of my biggest achievements was overcoming my addictions. My grandparents were residential school survivors. The intergenerational trauma affected me. I overcame my addictions and created Kaska Dena Designs. Through my business, I am able to help people; it feels good to help people with their self-esteem and to feel beautiful. A lot of the models I choose are on their healing journey, and when we do these shows, I believe it is healing them and me at the same time. I like to choose models who have an interest in modeling but don't know how to get started. Through Kaska Dena Designs, I have created modeling opportunities for many Indigenous and non-Indigenous young women in the North and elsewhere in Canada, the United States, and Australia. I provide information and resources to help them with their careers after the show. I like finding ways to help others as I build my business. I feel a great sense of accomplishment, knowing that I am helping the models I select for my shows with their self-worth and confidence on their healing journey. Also, raising my 6-year-old daughter and seeing her grow is another great source of accomplishment. In being independent, I can do what I love.

Souga SinLa - Thank you