



Top Notes

Barb Stegemann fights fire with fragrance for The 7 Virtues, a perfume company that sources essential oils from impoverished regions around the globe.

WORDS JOANNA FOX ILLUSTRATIONS STINA PERSSON

F

For a fragrance to go from concept to shelf in nine months is unheard of. For that perfume to prove a lucrative success in the notoriously competitive cosmetics industry is even more unlikely. But for Canadian entrepreneur Barb Stegemann and her company, The 7 Virtues, that's exactly how the story goes – and commercial success is just one part of the plot.

The tale begins on a tragic note: Stegemann's best friend, who was serving in Afghanistan, came back severely injured. "Our lives kind of went upside down, like people all over the world who have family and friends in the military," says Stegemann, who felt compelled to make a difference in the war-torn country. "I'm not a brave soldier, I'm not a world leader, so I just set about finding a new way to bring about change in countries that are rebuilding."

That new way became clear in 2009 when Stegemann, then working as a communications manager, read about Abdullah Arsala, a struggling farmer in Afghanistan. At a time when local farmers were turning to illegal but profitable poppy crops used in opium production, his tribe's traditional cultivation of orange blossoms was threatened. Stegemann contacted Arsala through an NGO and, using the last \$2,000 on her credit card, got her hands on high-quality organic oil made from the blossoms. With help from a friend, Toronto-based luxury perfumer Susanne Langmuir, her first fragrance was born: Afghanistan Orange Blossom.

Though Stegemann was working out of her garage and marketing the perfume only online, her initial run of 1,000 bottles sold out within two months. But she realized that she needed money to really get The 7 Virtues off the ground, so she applied to pitch her business to a panel of high-profile investors on the CBC television show *Dragons' Den*.

"My friends were like, 'What are you doing? They're going to destroy you!' But I really felt



the need to tell millions of people that we need to do trade with nations in strife. When the mission is bigger than you, you find a way."

Stegemann struck a chord with every "dragon" on the famously tough panel, especially W. Brett Wilson, who invested \$75,000 to acquire 15 percent of her company and remained a mentor even after he left the show. Since the episode aired in 2011, things have been moving at an incredible pace, from sales to accolades. Stegemann authored a self-help book, *The 7 Virtues of a Philosopher Queen*, gained an Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award, *Chatelaine* magazine's Beauty 100 Award and made *Profit* magazine's list of Top 30 Entrepreneurs. She was also the first female honorary colonel at Canadian Forces base Greenwood – a recognition of her efforts to aid Canada's objectives in Afghanistan.

"I was the first woman from Atlantic Canada to get a deal on *Dragons' Den*," adds the entrepreneur, "and this past December I was awarded Top Game Changer in *Dragons' Den* history. Not bad for a girl who was raised on welfare in Nova Scotia!"

Stegemann's upbringing has a lot to do with her philosophy: She does not believe in charity, but in empowerment. "People I have worked with have told me charity kills their creativity,

and I believe that. When you empower people, they can live their own dreams, and economic empowerment's very route is self-sufficiency."

There are now four 7 Virtues fragrances on the market: the original Afghanistan Orange Blossom, Noble Rose of Afghanistan, Vetiver of Haiti and Middle East Peace, which combines Israeli grapefruit oil with notes of lime and basil from Iran. They are all made of more than good intentions. In addition to their fairly traded ingredients and Made in Canada labels, they are vegan, phthalate-free, paraben-free and aren't tested on animals.

When asked about future fragrances, Stegemann shows a mix of sorrow and hope. "There are 33 countries in the world today facing some level of genocide, so, sadly, there is no shortage of countries we can shine light on, go into, buy oils and do trade."

Yet despite her success, Stegemann isn't simply out to grow her own company – she wants the entire industry to follow suit. "I'm on such a mission to get a cavalry of nations to do business this way, and to be so pleasantly rewarded," she says. "I don't believe the government and the military should do all the heavy lifting alone. Citizens and businesses can do so much to build peace, too." ●

"WHEN YOU EMPOWER people, they can live their own dreams." **BARB STEGEMANN**