

Passion

sparks candlemaker's innovation

By Scott Dance | staff | sdance@bizjournals.com

Background: Xu was raised in China before moving to the U.S. and founding Chesapeake Candle. Xu says she saw a demand for contemporary home goods, and the company has grown to be a major supplier for retailers like Target and Kohl's. Recently, it strengthened its presence in Maryland by opening its first U.S. factory in Glen Burnie.

When and why did you start your business? Back in 1994 we started a business that was mainly about home decor because we saw a gap between where the fashion business was and where the home business was. We thought there was something we can do to make a more contemporary product. We honed in on candles late in 1994.

What sparked your entrepreneurial spirit? I was actually trained as a diplomat so I didn't have an entrepreneurial education background. In many ways, what you get trained for doesn't

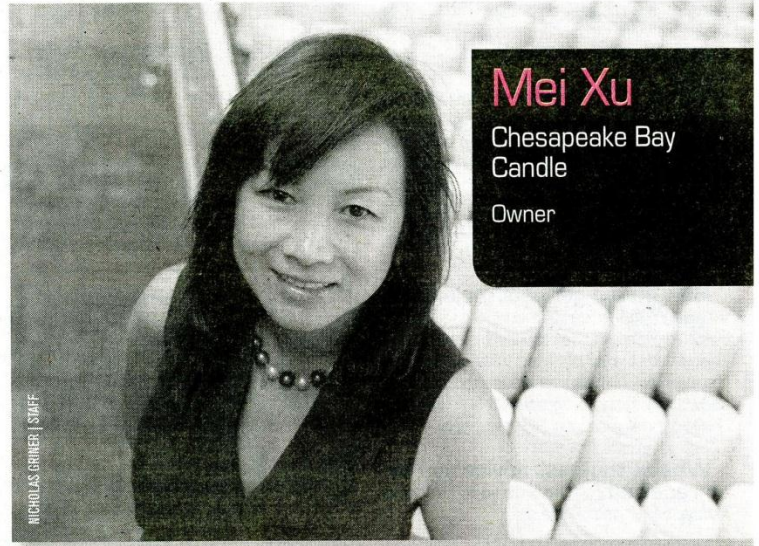
necessarily lead you to your final destination. One of the things that made it possible for me to start a business was having a strong language and culture background.

What is the biggest obstacle in starting a business? To figure out which one we wanted. There is so much that's possible. You can't be an importer of 100 categories of product.

To make a difference, we had to pick something unique.

How do you get past male chauvinism? I'm a lot more complicated than that — I'm a minority woman, and I'm very petite. People today, still, when I go to a bar, ask me for a driver's license. So you can imagine, when I was 26 people did not take me very seriously.

What I feel is, once you start speaking, people are more open-minded if you carry yourself in a certain manner. Don't pity yourself to be a woman.



Mei Xu

Chesapeake Bay
Candle

Owner

What's the best advice you ever received? It's "PPD." To be successful you have to have passion, have to have great people skills and you have to pay attention to details. In my life these are the things I try to seek in a new employee or a new partner.

If I can find that person with that combination, I think it's a great recipe for success.

What's the secret to your success? Passion. I think I still have a passion for beautiful things and for good people. You should follow your passion and then the money will come. I've seen enough people working for the Goldmans of the world, and they're not happy. I think if one follows the passion, it will have great results.

I knew I made it when... I was able to partner with Susan G Komen For the Cure. To have the courage to say, even if we don't make a penny out of this, it's the right thing for this company since we are predominantly women in this company.

In my culture where I came from, Buddhism is a big practice. I'm not a die-hard practitioner, but I do believe in circles, that what you get is what you need to give back.

When I hear the word 'no', I... when people say "no" in China, it actually means perhaps. If you push hard enough and dig deep enough, it becomes a maybe, and then maybe if you put in enough effort and go the extra mile, it becomes a yes. Don't easily give up.