

# ALUMNI

## NAU Distinguished Alumna Changes World One Gift Box at a Time



In 1988, Tonya Ludwig, a 2018 Distinguished Service Alumni Award recipient, was not considering college.

“My mom and I were out on errands and on a whim I asked her to stop at National American University,” Tonya recalled. “I went in and enrolled that day. The admissions representative was nice, helpful and encouraging.”

Tonya initially enrolled to pursue a travel and tourism degree, but a work study opportunity at the Pennington County State’s Attorney’s office prompted her to change gears.

“I found law really fascinating so I switched my degree to paralegal studies.”

Tonya graduated with her paralegal studies degree in 1991 and continued working for the State’s Attorney’s office for 10 years, including time as a victim witness advocate.

In 2001, a move to Omaha, Nebraska prompted a career shift. She needed a break from the emotional stress that came from working in prosecutor’s office and dealing with victims of crime, but still sought a job that had meaning.

“I was hired as a receptionist for the marketing department in the Omaha Children’s Hospital,” said Tonya. “We were still dealing with stressful and sometimes sad situations, but it was also an environment full of hope.”

Tonya spent 8 years at Children’s Hospital, earning several promotions into marketing positions, including as Public Relations Coordinator. Among other roles, she oversaw marketing for the hospital’s nationally renowned eating disorders program.

She was also a monthly contributor to Women’s Edition Magazine for seven years and has completed, but not yet published, two novels.

After 8 years at Children’s Hospital, she went back to her legal roots, first working for a law firm and then in a corporate legal department on insurance issues.

Although she enjoyed the law, she felt unfulfilled working in corporate law.

“I’ve always gravitated toward jobs in which I could find meaning. My preference has always been to do work that makes a difference and helps other people.”

She and her husband began brainstorming about starting a business, one in which she could give back to the Omaha community. They hit upon an idea that would help clients give truly meaningful gifts while also helping small businesses and nonprofits.

“We had settled on the concept of an online gift business,” said Tonya. “And, then we added a couple of ‘what ifs.’ ‘What if’ we customized the gifts using only products from small businesses, nothing mass manufactured? And, ‘what if’ we donate 5% of all our profits to 5 Omaha-based nonprofit organizations? As the answers to these questions crystalized, so did our business plan.”

In January 2015, after 10 months of preparing, [621 Gifts](#) was launched.

“It’s been great fun,” said Tonya. “We’ve grown from having all our inventory and production in our home to having a storage facility set up for filling orders.”

“And, best of all, we are making joyful giving a reality,” said Tonya. “We really work hard to curate meaningful gifts while benefiting the small businesses across the country and providing support for nonprofits within our community.”



And, their good work has not gone unnoticed.

621 Gifts was recently named a 2018 American Small Business Champion by SCORE, a business-to-business volunteer mentoring organization, in partnership with Sam’s Club. American Small Business Champions are recognized for their community impact and business success. All American Small Business Champions are eligible for the grand prize of \$15,000, to be selected in September 2018.



“I’m heartened that SCORE recognized that 621 Gifts is providing business opportunity to other small businesses in our community while also benefiting nonprofits in our community,” said Tonya. “We proved we could operate a successful business that also benefits our community.”

During this time, Tonya has also worked as a social media & digital marketing strategist with 316 Strategy Group writing blogs, web content and marketing materials for clients.

On June 1, 2018 at NAU’s graduation in Bellevue, Nebraska, just outside of Omaha, Tonya will receive the 2018 Distinguished Service Alumni Award in recognition of her overall career success and her efforts to make a difference for her clients, customers and community.

Tonya’s journey from enrolling in NAU “on a whim” to a forward-thinking business owner today took place over years that were full of meaning, education and experience that all come into play today as she continues to grow 621 Gifts.