



Mark Ford
AMERICAN DAKOTA
americandakota.com



The city of Calhoun in northwest Georgia sits in the heart of the Cherokee Nation. Today, Calhoun is home to a huge textile industry, which includes American Dakota, a niche rug supplier that uses Native American artists to create its designs.

Owner Mark Ford has been working with a team from the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDECD) to facilitate exporting his products. Recently, he discussed his business model and its reciprocal relationship with the area's indigenous people.

What prompted you to do business in Calhoun?

We're in the textile business, and it's a textile town. Even in high school, if I had a summer job, it was usually with a textile company. Since I was 17 years old I've been dabbling with textiles. When I was in college, I swore I'd never do rugs. I'm going to get a real job! Lo and behold, here I am doing rugs.

You work with indigenous people.

In college, I minored in Native American studies. I've been a staff artist since '93 with Whispering Wind magazine, which is a bi-monthly magazine that covers crafts, culture, powwows, and history. That work is where some of the inspiration comes from. Part of our mission at American Dakota is to seek out positive relationships with Native artists and create passive income for them. It's a real treat to work with someone who's off the grid a bit, yet they can earn income from something they create.

You have an equal profit sharing arrangement with your artists, is that right?

Yes! If I make 50 bucks, they get 25. I never begrudge writing those checks because that's what we planned

to do from the beginning, and it's very rewarding. It comes full circle, where you see somebody and you build a relationship and some trust. It takes a while to capture their weaves and designs and get them to approve it. Some of these artists have spent nine or 10 months making one rug — they'll sell it and get one check. Or, they can share that design with us and get perpetual income forever. They own the copyright. It's their design. The fun part is working with the artists and seeing how to handle their artwork or rendering; then we get the nod from the artist and put the spotlight on them — that's our goal.

And you then manufacture and distribute their designs.

Yes! And we help them find stores, if they'll allow us, and we'll introduce their rugs to our existing customers.

Are there other companies in the area doing the same sort of thing as you?

No, we are definitely an oddity. We're small compared to others. Their sample departments are bigger than ours. And they have to feed that machinery, so at their plants they have looms, printers, various machines ... It's like a steam engine you have to keep chugging the coal into.

Exporting; you tried Japan at first, correct?

I worked with the State of Georgia looking for opportunities. Initially, we were very well received in Japan. I knew we would be. If it's one thing they appreciate, it's craftsmanship; it fits in with their culture. They'd rather buy something handmade than mass-produced. They like American iconic stuff: Harley Davidson, Mickey Mouse, Playboy... These things resonate with them, so when you have a company that has that uniquely Americana look, the Japanese get it. Japan knows American nuances. They know more about Navajo (artistry) than a lot of Americans do.

They liked the aesthetic and the fact that we work with tribes; there was a lot of potential there.

The next chapter with the State of Georgia is trying to get into Canada. We're already exporting there via FedEx, but there's some bigger potential. The people at the state office are coaching me on opportunities. They've been fantastic. They go to Japan and Canada for me and do their homework. They take it seriously.

What do you want to be known for?

We want to be good at our genre. We want to be the best. That means setting the bar in a cabin or a rustic mountain home where others are held to our standard. That would be flattering if it happened.



The Georgia Department of Economic Development's nationally recognized Trade team works with Georgia-based small businesses like American Dakota to expand their global sales, making companies more resilient and creating opportunities for growth. The Trade teams services, ranging from market research to international connections, are provided at no cost to eligible Georgia businesses. **To learn more or connect with one of our trade team members, visit georgia.org/trade.**

