

Actress Mary Steenburgen and her daughter, Lilly McDowell Walton, combined their love for home design and travel to create an eco-friendly candle line infused with the legacy of their mother and grandmother, respectively. Here, the mother-daughter team share their inspiration for Nell's Compass and the nonprofit they partnered with to light the way for families in poverty.



AFM: *What sparked the initial idea for Nell's Compass?*

MS: I am part-owner of a store called Rooms & Gardens in Santa Monica. I would go on buying trips in Europe for the store and when I would do so, the candle lines I was drawn to were made in Europe and were crazy expensive. So I asked my daughter if she would like to help me develop a candle that was...soy-based with a lead-free wick, but has the beauty of the European candles with the advantage of being made in America and was affordable.

LMW: We didn't really plan on starting a candle company. We were just brainstorming the perfect candle we would want in the store. And we thought, 'Well, why don't we just try and make it?' We found all the right people and put all the puzzle pieces together.

AFM: *What is the story behind the company name?*

MS: At the time of doing all this, my mother, Nell, was in the hospital. We originally intended to name the candle line "Compass" because we liked the idea of traveling through scent, but while at my mom's bedside, we found out the name "Compass" had already been taken. My son suggested we name it "Nell's Compass." It was a perfect idea because she was a very beautiful person, inwardly and outwardly. She was inspirational to other people, and there was a very beautiful glow about her—she lit up the room when she walked into it. All these things felt intuitively right to us. It feels like this multi-generational female-driven company that shares in a bigger way. The idea...made us want to give a portion of each candle sale to a nonprofit that we really care about called Heifer International.

AFM: *What is Heifer International?*

MS: The basis of it is giving people throughout the world, including this country, animals appropriate to their environment. In preparation for the animals, the people's ecosystem is prepared and improved so that even the land around their home becomes more environmentally sustainable. It not only lifts up the family from poverty, but their very environment is improved. Most important to Lilly and I, the animals are not given to any community that practices discrimination against women. So if women are not allowed to be profit participants of selling produce of the animal, then the animal won't go to that community. And what happened is, there are villages that have changed their whole way of thinking, and women have been lifted up because they want the animals so badly. It's hard to see that in this country that a pair of goats can change lives and even change long-standing prejudices and ways of living.

AFM: *What does the future hold for Nell's Compass?*

MS: We're also potentially going to work with another organization that we love very much called Oceana that's about the sustainability of the ocean. We're planning on developing a line that has to do with the ocean.

LMW: Even though it's just candles, we created a whole world that could launch us into other things like linens, napkins or tablecloths. I am starting to work on a soap line for the four scents we have.