

Our Towns

LIFE

CENTEREACH

Selling what's made, with love

At Women's Expo, there's a story behind every scarf and tablecloth

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Sitting at her little table amid bustling merchants and bargain-seeking shoppers, Carol Lindquist, with her salt-and-pepper bun and large-rimmed glasses, is the scene of quiet calm. She doesn't hassle customers who chance to glance at her hand-knit scarves and painstakingly crafted earrings; there isn't much bargaining either, since her prices are already as low as she can allow and a good deal lower than some of her fellow merchants at the Women's Expo, an annual market and showcase for Long Island's female entrepreneurs.

Instead, she smiles indulgently and chats about the great deal she got on eBay for a bundle of gemstones. They're from an abandoned factory in New England, she says conspiratorially, and generally hard to find. There's really no need to get worked up — if someone is meant to buy one of her pieces, she will.

"There's a rightness of someone picking out something that you made," Lindquist said. "Sometimes, I'll make something, and I'll think, 'Who would want that?' . . . and there will be that one person who will pick that exact item. It's a very cosmic connection."

A time for creativity

And one she discovered only recently. Lindquist, 52, of East Setauket, has been many things in her life: a costume designer, a mother, a student pursuing her doctorate in sociology, and, perhaps most striking, a cancer patient. She was diagnosed with stage-three breast cancer more than five years ago and given long odds. After treatment at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, the cancer went into remission. It was around



The Middle Country Library's annual Women's Expo included Najda Adman, top, of Najda's Tablecloths, and, below, Theresa Cohen, owner of Nubian African Market in Coram, who shows a mask to James and Jeanne McGrath of Lake Grove.

that time, she said, that she began to sell products that she makes.

When asked, she is unsure how one thing led to another. Knitting, she said, helps her cancer. And moments later, she seems struck by an idea.

"When you do the reading [about cancer], it says to find what gives you joy," she said. "It's like me being more like me." Her words are interspersed with a ringing laughter that seems to punctuate the point. "It all fits," she said.

Lindquist isn't the only woman who has found her calling. The expo, a yearly event held at the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach since 2000, attracted about 75 vendors on a weekday early this month, said library director Sandra Feinberg. Many, she



said, had to be turned away in what proved to be the expo's biggest year yet.

"It was waiting to happen," Feinberg said. "Someone just had to discover it." Vendors had a \$100 entrance fee for the all-day event. This year's market

boasted everything from hand-made plates to tablecloths to paintings. And, spread throughout, a number of businesswomen with highly personal reasons for getting into the game.

There is Jennifer BonGiorno, 39, of Dix Hills, who has taken

a rare day off from caring for her autistic daughter to show her wares. She makes glass jewelry with her dentist father under her business, Pieces and Me. Though jewelry-making had been a hobby of her father's, BonGiorno took it up professionally after she left her day job more than eight years ago to care for her daughter.

A way to stay home

Soon, BonGiorno was producing her most popular item: a puzzle-piece-shaped pendant. The jewelry, which has become a symbol for autism awareness, sells for \$25, \$15 of which goes to autism charities. BonGiorno also donates a part of the sale of other jewelry pieces to autism research.

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What's made with love

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That includes glass jewelry, cut into intricate shapes and painted, which has turned into a niche product. At an event like this one she can move up to 8,000 items.

Her biggest motivation is her daughter, Cassie, who is now 8½.

"I couldn't go back to work," BonGiorino said. "But we could do jewelry instead; and maybe, in the future, it's something my daughter could help me with."

Donna Hadjipopov of Montauk, 56, who runs BulgarUSA, a growing manufacturer that sells handmade plates from Bulgaria, said this kind of circumstance is true for many.

"So many women have converted a hobby or done something just to help someone and begun a business," she said, adding that it still isn't enough, since a minority of businesses are owned by women. "The library is doing sensational work."

Success in America

Bulgar, which was recently showcased in Elle Decor magazine, had similar altruistic origins. Hadjipopov and her husband, George, who also runs the company, visited a destitute Bulgaria after the fall of the Soviet Union. Seeing the harsh conditions her husband's aunt was forced to contend with, they decided to help — offering to sell some handmade

plates. The business took off, and they now have a factory in Bulgaria and a warehouse in East Hampton.

Sewing to 'perfection'

Najda Adman, 65, of Huntington, an immigrant from Turkey, has a similar success story. Adman was taught to sew by her aunt, an haute couture seamstress. When she moved to the States, she realized there was little demand for handmade dresses. Instead, she turned to tablecloths. Now, Najda's Tablecloths sell all over New York and Connecticut.

"I'm so successful, and everyone knows me in Long Island," Adman said. The secret to her success, she said, is no secret at all.

"It's perfect," she said of her tablecloths, pointing to her impeccable seams. "I call this perfection. This is perfection," she says pointing to another. "This is perfection," she adds again.

Back at her table, Lindquist sits among her wares. Her current favorites are earrings shaped like little women. They're dancers, she says, and posable. Their faces, the size of small buttons, are double-sided — so they're always looking at you, no matter what, Lindquist said. For her, making beautiful things has become a necessity.

"I get seized with an idea, and that's how these things come to me. It inhabits you until you do it," she said. "I'm playing with life."