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## LEISURE



Photo from Elizabeth Malafi

From left: Alli Berman, Kerry Gauthier, Sonja Bellem, Roslyne Johnson, Elizabeth Malafi and Amber Sroka at last year's event.

## Women's Expo returns to Middle Country Library

### A day of shopping, inspiring stories, networking and fun

BY DONNA NEWMAN

Looking to jump-start your holiday shopping? Next week the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach offers the perfect venue. On Thursday, Oct. 3 between 11 am and 6 pm, the library will again be transformed into a marketplace where more than 80 Long Island women entrepreneurs will display their wares. The annual Women's EXPO, now in its 13th year, showcases a plethora of fine art and crafts, clothing and jewelry, home goods and children's items, specialty foods and much more. You'll find an assortment of unique gift items and you'll support the economic independence of local women as you shop.

Each year the audience has grown for

what has become a very popular fall event. "Last year," said EXPO coordinator Elizabeth Malafi, "we had our biggest turnout ever with more than 2,300 people attending. This year, we're hoping to break that record."

While the shopping is great, the best part of the Women's EXPO will be the inspiring gals you will meet. These women represent all ages and stages of life. They are ethnically and culturally diverse. They are artists and crafters and entrepreneurs. They head established, well-known businesses and start-ups, and everything in between. But the one thing they share is a passion for working at something they love.

Sonja Bellem, a former marketing and P.R. woman, said her new business, Fascination Baby, started with a hair band acces-



Top image from Patricia Kios, left photo from Sonja Bellem

Above, 'Little Gull Lighthouse,' by Patricia Noel Kios; left, one of Sonja Bellem's handmade hats modeled by her beautiful daughter.



sory she dubbed The Fascinator, named for chic headpieces worn by women in the U.K. Her line has grown from headbands to hats to fairy wings and tutus, incorporating her signature style. All handmade, each of her hats is one-of-a-kind, adorned with feathers, ribbons and vintage bits and buttons. Not just for babies, this headgear is suitable for toddlers, children and teens. When a friend suggested she open a shop on the online gallery Etsy, which she did, the business took off on its own. Now, two years in, she sells through boutiques and online and ships all over the world.

Grateful for her success, Bellem established a policy of giving back early on. If she learns of a child battling cancer, she will send out a hat or fairy wings with a crown or headband, free of charge, to any hospital in the United States. To view her line, visit <http://fascinationbaby.etsy.com>.

Alli Berman's story goes back 25 years. Her rich life as a world traveler and fine artist was interrupted when she suffered a stroke. "I turned to my studio to help myself feel less frustrated and scared about the whole situation," she reminisced, "and a new type of art came out of that. I didn't realize it for years, but what I was actually do-

ing at that time was trying to put the pieces back together, and help the pathways in my brain. I did it intuitively. The puzzle art that came out of this process was something I enjoyed; it relaxed me, it made me feel good. Apparently, other people appreciated it for the same reasons, and I started to think I could help people with my art. That's how it all began."

The puzzle art has taken her in new directions, but she never viewed it as a product until it came to the attention of behavioral optometrist Susan Fisher. The two began working together and Puzzle Art International Inc. was born. Said Berman, "We carved out a niche for ourselves in the therapy market, which is a hybrid: it's not just vision therapy, it's art therapy, occupational therapy — a tool for professionals working with those who have brain injuries. Educators use it to help students. There are so many applications."

At the EXPO, Berman will be exhibiting her consumer products for the first time. They are designed to improve brain fitness through creativity. Her skill builders, for people of all ages and abilities, offer exercises to improve memory and focus, creativity. *WOMEN'S EXPO continued on page B29*

## WOMEN'S EXPO

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and discrimination. "I use a skill builder every morning when I wake up, before I do anything else," Berman said. "It kind of wakes my brain up, makes me feel like I've just had a workout." She will be doing demos throughout the EXPO. Learn more at <http://puzzlearttherapy.com>.

Newcomer to the show Patricia Noel Klos will be showcasing her paintings of lighthouses and other nautical landscapes along with prints and note cards. As a teen, she enjoyed painting landscapes and was always interested in art and design. After several years as an interior designer, Klos decided to take time off to be more available to her family. Eight years ago, with two young children at home, she started working part-time as a library assistant at Middle Country Public Library.

Last year when she had the opportunity to paint a mural at Suffolk Cooperative Library Systems, Klos chose a theme of lighthouses, because libraries are a beacon to reading and learning. "When my cousin, a liver transplant recipient, was fundraising for the American Liver Foundation, I donated a painting of a Fire Island lighthouse for her Chinese auction charity event. I overheard several people comment on how they liked my painting. Then this spring, as it became apparent that I was now the head of a single-parent household, two opportunities were presented. A library Take-a-Trip cruise of East End lighthouses, and I saw blank Women's Expo vendor application forms on a colleague's desk. It was

a lightbulb moment. I went on that cruise, on a foggy day in July, then came home and painted. This will be the first time I'm looking to sell my artwork and I hope that people enjoy it."

When Kerry Gauthier was laid off from her corporate job, she decided to return to school to become an English teacher. "To keep myself busy and help support myself," she explained, "I started making jewelry. All the books and poems I was studying and reading kept popping up in my jewelry, so I just went with it." Gauthier named her business, using the Gaelic version of her first name, as an homage to her Irish grandparents, who inspired her love of books — and tea — and the sharing of both. Ciarraí Studios celebrated its first anniversary online in August. The business now occupies her time and school is, temporarily, on hold. To see Gauthier's literature-inspired jewelry, visit <http://etsy.com/shop/ciarrastudios>.

Clinical social worker Roslyne Johnson established her first business more than a dozen years ago. Her most recent venture, Maya India Spa, evolved when she sought a remedy for her daughters' dry skin and eczema. "Nothing over-the-counter seemed to be working, so I started mixing my own oils and butters to find a way to combat the dryness. I came up with a blend that worked well. I shared it with my Mom. She shared it with friends. And it grew from there." Johnson now has a bath and body products line with an interesting twist. "Most of my products look and smell like something you would want to pop in your mouth and eat," said Johnson. They are actually works of art. Her hand-made soaps take the shape of baked goods and candies, smoothie scrubs



Alli Berman with her puzzle therapy line.

and body frosting. "I use the best ingredients I can find. And everything I sell we use at home." View her distinctive products at <http://mayaindiaspa.com>. She is modeling survival skills for her daughters: things that life taught her when she was laid off a few years ago from her school social work position. "You need to have some sort of backup plan," she tells them. "I'm helping them to understand that if you have a thought, an idea, a passion, something that you know you're good at, go for it. Make it happen. That way you know you have something

to fall back on that you really love. In the end, if you need it, you can put 100 percent into that, and no one can ever tell you what you're worth. You can determine your worth." What excellent advice.

Admission to the EXPO is free. Lunch will be available for purchase from 11 am to 3 pm in the EXPO Café, catered by Fifth Season of Port Jefferson. Baked goods from local bakeries will be offered in the Tea at Half-Past-Three space. The library is located at 101 Eastwood Blvd, Centereach. For information, visit [womenssexpo.org](http://womenssexpo.org).

Photo from Elizabeth Malin