

LEISURE

# Arts & LIFESTYLES

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Sixth annual

## Women's Expo

to be held at Middle Country  
Public Library

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# Sixth annual Women's Expo to be held at MCPL

*Women entrepreneurs provide day of holiday gift shopping and networking, too*

BY DONNA NEWMAN

When is a library more than just books? If it's the Middle Country Public Library, the answer is, "All the time!" With its extensive offerings and innovative programming, there's always something special going on. Stop by on Wednesday, October 4 between 11 and 6 and find this community hub transformed into a marketplace of products created and/or distributed by Long Island women. The sixth annual Women's Expo will consist of an art gallery, jewelry store, apparel boutique, florist, gift shop, photography studio, crafts display, skin care salon, food purveyor, toy store, home decor outlet, ethnic market and, above all, consummate networking venue.

While the wares are varied and quite diverse — and well worth the trip — it is the women you will meet who will immensely increase the value of your shopping day. Each of the participants has a story to tell. Some have arrived at their business ventures via a straight-forward path of focused interest or passion; some have taken a more circuitous route, propelled by circumstances, or timing.

First-time exhibitor Jennifer BonGiorno began designing her wearable glass art in response to a host of needs. When her daughter was diagnosed with autism, her family had need of extra funds to cover treatment and care expenses. She also felt a need to raise awareness about the dis-



Photo by Barbara Jordan

Exhibitors and sponsors at the Women's Expo: Najda Adman, Bonnie Bittner, Shirley Darkeh, Margaret Harvey (Long Island Fund for Women and Girls, co-chair of event), Nelly Valverde, Jennifer BonGiorno, Pat Swyler and Janet Jones (event co-chair, community relations director for Long Island for Verizon)

order. Finally, she wanted to find something positive and empowering for her daughter to do. Eventually, "she can be a part of this, besides being the inspiration behind it," BonGiorno decided. Among the items she creates are glass puzzle pieces (the puzzle piece is the symbol for autism) that she sells as a fundraiser for autism research. Each item she designs and fabricates is one of a kind, employing "lamp-worked" and "fused glass

layer" techniques that she learned from family members, who have been creating glass art for years.

The handmade scarves and accessories of Arabena Enterprises are also a family affair. "Now that I've retired," said Shirley Darkeh, "I'm going back to my roots." The daughter of a tailor and a dressmaker, Darkeh teams with her sister, Louise Lowe — herself a designer with over 60 years experience as

an accomplished seamstress — to create a line of women's clothing accessories. Throughout her life, Darkeh enjoyed creating art of all kinds: paintings, sculpture, craft items — but only as a hobby. Although she still teaches a family development class for Cornell University, her retirement as Director of the African American Museum has opened up some time to devote to her business. The sisters are happy to be returning to the Women's Expo after a year's hiatus. Said Darkeh, "Women should know, it doesn't matter what your age, or your status in life, you can always keep busy learning and creating."

Fine artist Pat Swyler, a sculptor who creates ceramics with a distinctly Eastern inspiration is passionate about her art. "If you're an artist, you're obsessed," she said. "It's your life." Holding a master of fine arts degree from the School for American Crafts she was, until her retirement, a high school art teacher. Swyler has also taught at the college level at Dowling and Stony Brook. Her work has been widely exhibited, including locally, at the Heckscher and Islip Art Museums. "I think the nurturing qualities of women are shown in my work," she said, which might explain why she was recruited for the Women's Expo at last year's Gallery North outdoor art show.

Also new to the Expo this year is  
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## Women's Expo

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Najda Adman, who will display table-toppers and reversible handbags made from fine drapery and upholstery fabrics. What's a table-topper? "It's a 54-inch square cloth, used as a decorative accent on a table of any size or shape," said Adman. If you're not sure how it works, she has photos and instructions to enlighten you. Specializing in home décor — especially window treatments — Adman hopes the expo will enable her to enlarge her customer base.

Nelly's Alfajores, caramel-filled gourmet cookies created from a South American recipe, were first baked by Nelly Valverde as a reward for her students. "I worked in a lot of different schools. This one group of students were so disciplined and willing to learn; I was so impressed with these kids," she said. So she made a batch of cookies, using a Peruvian recipe, from the land of her birth. The kids went wild. Now, seven years later, with only word-of-mouth advertising, she makes 40 to 50 dozen per day, and her cookies have traveled to New York City, to Connecticut, to Florida and California. Her family makes fun of her, she said, but "it keeps me busy and I'm happy." This will be her third year exhibiting at the Women's Expo. "I love the way people approach me," she confessed. "I love the reaction to my cookies. In three hours, all my cookies are gone." After she runs out of merchandise at the Expo, she will be taking orders as well.

About five years ago, Bonnie Bittner took a class in stained glass at a local shop, "just for fun." She loved it. She began designing and constructing pieces, mostly for herself and as gifts. About two years ago, at her sister's prodding, she offered her creations for sale at an open house attended by about a dozen people. "I felt good making stuff that I liked," she said, "but when I saw that outsiders loved it as well, I knew I could create a business."

Using the copper foil Tiffany method, she creates



Photo by Donna Newman

Elizabeth Malafi (left), information specialist with the Miller Business Resource Center at Middle Country Public Library and Nelly Valverde (right)

windows, ornaments and decorative items. Originally a quilter, she began adapting quilt square patterns to stained glass. As she has become more comfortable with her new medium, she says she would like to get some formal art training. She hopes to return to school for that. The Middle Country Public Library commissioned her to create a framed mirror that now hangs in the newly redone Children's Department. Some of her pieces are on display at A Gift of Faith in Port Jefferson.

The Women's Expo has doubled in size since its inception in 2001. The first year, there were 34 exhibitors; this year, more than 70 vendors will fill the library, providing the traditional diversity of goods as well as

people. "There are women who have outgrown us," said Elizabeth Malafi, who coordinates the expo from the library's Miller Business Resource Center. "They're not coming back because they are just too busy." Added Barbara Jordan, the library's assistant director, "We miss them, but at the same time, we are happy for them."

"Every year it's a new party," said event co-chair Margaret Harvey of the Long Island Fund for Women & Girls, which partners with the Middle Country Library Foundation to present the Women's Expo. Co-chair Janet Jones added, "The reason Verizon became involved six years ago is that [the expo] fits perfectly into our goals for literacy, technology and workforce development."

Lunch will be available for purchase in the Expo Café from 11 am to 3 pm so attendees will be able to shop all day. Last year's addition, "Tea at Half-Past-Three," will be enhanced this year with a book signing by a guest author. Long Island pioneer vintner Louisa Thomas Hargrave will discuss her book, *The Vineyard*.

Admission is free, but it is hoped that attendees will purchase raffle tickets for chances to win a selection of 45 different prizes. Assistant Director Jordan pointed out "a nice feature is that you can put your raffle tickets in contention only for the prizes you'd like to win." All proceeds help support the LIFWG grant-making program as well as the library's Miller Business Resource Center services.

### On the cover:

Top: Shirley Darkeh, left and Jennifer BonGiorno, right  
Bottom: Najda Adman

Photos on left by Donna Newman, photo on right by Barbara Jordan