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BUSINESS

Long Island women entrepreneurs showcased at MCPL'S EXPO

BY ELLEN BARCEL

According to the National Association of Women Business Owners, more than 9 million firms in the U.S. are owned by women. Although many of these firms are large, many others are small, run by a single entrepreneur. Many are run by women who find they are able to work from a home office or studio. They are writers, artists, craftspeople, importers, designers and other entrepreneurs, many earning a living while caring for families.

Fifteen years ago, the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach began a tradition that continues to this day — the annual Women's EXPO — a one-day event where local women entrepreneurs can network with their colleagues, display and sell their work at the library and get the word out about their great products.

At this year's event, to be held Thursday, Oct. 6, expect 83 vendors, said Elizabeth Malafi, coordinator, Adult Services and the Miller Business Resource Center. Approximately 25 will be new vendors while the rest will be old friends. "It's sad," she said, "when some people you really love are no longer at the show, but you know they are succeeding." Sometimes their business just outgrows the EXPO.

What's really exciting about the EXPO is the great diversity of entrepreneurs. Shoppers can find everything from jewelry and pottery to beverages, from crocheted items



Photo from Elizabeth Malafi

Above, from left, Elizabeth Malafi and Marlene Gonzalez of the Middle Country Public Library; Bebe Federmann, Mari Irizarry and Dawn Rotolo.

to home goods. The one overriding theme is that the products and services are provided by women. Noted Malafi, the EXPO "is getting bigger and bigger every year."

During the day, there will be two opportunities to dine. The EXPO Café will be open during lunchtime with food provided

and sold by the Fifth Season Café from Port Jefferson. At 4 p.m., visit Sweet Street and Beats. "People can come and purchase snacks and listen to music."

Malafi emphasized that this "is not just a trade show. We're here to support women and help them succeed in the business

world." The EXPO, a project of the library's Miller Business Center, provides workshops to women entrepreneurs throughout the year, helping them to establish their businesses. Here's a sampling of vendors scheduled to be on site:

Dawn Rotolo

Dawn Rotolo, owner of Dragon's Nest Baked Goods, fills a very special need. Many consumers find that they are gluten or dairy intolerant, or have other food allergies. Shopping for these specialty items can be challenging and what's found in the stores either is limited or not as flavorful as the traditional ones.

Here's where Rotolo comes in. Finding out that she herself was gluten intolerant, she decided to fulfill a dream. "I always dreamed of owning my own bakery," she said. And, that bakery would have foods that people with gluten intolerance could enjoy. "Everything is gluten free," but, she didn't stop there. She went on to develop products that were dairy free, nut free and vegan. Items include a variety of breads (including a "rye style" bread made without rye flour) cupcakes, cookies (even meringue and rainbow), cakes and muffins. She will even take orders for other specialty items.

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Rotolo has no classical training in baking, but has always loved it. While it was her mother who was a professional cook, her father was the one who frequently asked her to bake. "That's where my love of baking started. It reminds me of my dad."

Where did the name Dragon's Nest come from? "I've always loved dragons and I didn't want a company named after me."

Think of a dragon breathing fire — there's the oven for the baking. In addition to appearing at the EXPO, Rotolo is at selected farmers markets (check Instagram or Facebook for specifics).

Bebe Federmann

Bebe Federmann of Soul Vessel Designs said that she "stumbled on pottery. I always wanted to take a pottery class." Then she came across Randy Blume. "I was with her when she was working in her basement" before opening her Hands on Clay studio in East Setauket. Federmann worked for her for a number of years before Blume moved out of the area. She noted, "There hasn't been anything to replace it."

Federmann went on, "I was then in the corporate world until four years ago ... but never gave up [on pottery making], doing it as a hobby." But then she wanted to go back to her pottery studio full time.

Where does the name of her business Soul Vessel Designs come from? "I put my heart and soul into what I make." She noted, "With clay, possibilities are endless."

Her pottery is primarily tableware, mugs, bowls, pitchers, vases, etc. "They are functional art, designed to be used every day, very long lasting." She added, "and planters. I've done a lot of those lately." Her color palette is primarily neutral, with "a lot of white, some blues and greens" for decoration." Federmann added that she also takes special orders. "I do a lot of custom designs, including work for restaurants." This will be Federmann's third year at the EXPO. "It's one of the best, such a great show."



Jessica Giovachino

Jessica Giovachino of GioGio Designs is a residential architect by profession. "That's how I got involved in home goods," she noted. Sometimes after designing a home, she is asked to design related home goods.

Giovachino's home goods are eco-friendly, made from bamboo. "Bamboo is a sustainable wood." After being harvested, bamboo can be replanted and regrows quickly. Giovachino joked that when people hear her products are made from bamboo, they quickly say, "You can come to my yard."

Many of her home products are slotted. "They fit together like a puzzle ... candleholders can be taken apart to store," she said, adding that she wants her products to be not only useful, but fun.

For larger products, "I work with a cabinet maker," to cut the pieces. "I finish them in my studio. Others I cut out with a laser cutter. Because I'm an architect I'm used to designing on the computer ... then send the file to my laser cutter." After the pieces are cut she does all the finishing.

In addition, "I do a whole line of jewelry as well. All the jewelry is laser cut from wood, stainless steel and leather," she said.

Giovachino has been involved in designing home goods and jewelry for three years

— "starting my fourth year." However, this is her first year at the Women's EXPO. "A friend does catering for the event. She told me about it ... it looked great, really exciting." In addition to the EXPO, she and her work can be found at local craft shows, but "I'm moving to wholesale, getting crafts in boutiques."



Alaila Lee

Alaila Lee, owner of Clovesz, may be the youngest vendor at the EXPO. "I'm just 21," she said. After graduating from Bay Shore High School, Lee went to the Culinary Academy of Long Island in Syosset. Then she "started selling hibiscus flower drinks [Sorrel]. They're representative of my culture — Jamaican," using a family recipe.

The beverages come in several flavors, including pineapple and mango and can be "served hot or cold, still or sparking."

The drinks are sold in really unique bottles. When she was looking for a unique shape, she found that many shapes and designs were on the shelf already with other products. "I looked around and saw a light bulb," and so the light bulb bottle came into existence.

Lee markets primarily through expos and farmers markets but "I would like to expand

in the culinary world." Products she is considering include tea bags and other beverages.

Since so many of these vendors have items that make great holiday presents, this is a wonderful opportunity to start your shopping in a relaxed and fun atmosphere, knowing that you are helping the local economy.

Mari Irizarry

Mari Irizarry of Hook and Wool is one of the vendors presenting her work at the Women's EXPO for the first time. Irizarry is from Brooklyn and moved to Long Island two years ago. "I was a graphic designer and marketing director" in Brooklyn, said Irizarry. "When I moved here I left that job and made more time" for her handmade items.

"As a kid growing up in Brooklyn, times were occasionally tough and we moved around a lot ... Looking back, a lot of the things we had, that outlasted apartments we lived in, were handmade. Not only were they made with someone's energy and love, but they were high quality — truly pieces of art. One of the only material things I have from childhood is a hand-crocheted Christmas stocking that our neighbor, Mrs. Genovich, made for me," she said.

Irizarry learned crocheting, sewing and knitting from her mother, who learned from her mother. "I didn't do much as a child," she added but "it was 1999 and I was broke. I had a lot of family and friends I wanted to give holiday presents to ... so I got to stitching." She added that some of those items are still being worn today.

Irizarry's wool and acrylic items are handmade by her and include scarves, hats and blankets. She noted, "I'm at my happiest when I'm creating something to share and enjoy with loved ones." Speaking of next Thursday's event, she said, "I'm really looking forward to it. It's so exciting to be invited to the EXPO."

The annual Women's EXPO will take place on Thursday, Oct. 6, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. the Middle Country Public Library, 101 Eastwood Boulevard, Centereach. Admission is free and there is ample parking. For further information, call the library at 631-585-9393 or go to www.womenssexpoli.org.