

Long Island Business NEWS

Oct. 15-21, 2004

Where Business Gets Down To Business

Women's Expo promotes sales, networking opps

By LYNN ZAWACKI

CENTEREACH – There wasn't a parking space to be had at Middle Country Public Library Oct. 10. No, library patrons weren't knocking down the doors to check out the latest bestsellers. They were checking out the Women's Expo, a marketplace of Long Island women entrepreneurs.

No typical arts and crafts fair, the expo was presented by the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls, the Middle Country Library Foundation and its Miller Business Resource Center not only as a sales venue for exhibitors' products but also to promote networking and economic development activity.

"It started four years ago with 35 women exhibitors," said Barbara Jordan, Middle Country Public Library's assistant director of community relations. "This was the best-attended expo ever, with a conservative estimate of nearly 1,500 in attendance. The Expo breaks all records for the library in terms of the concentration of people coming in such a short span of hours."

With 60 booths set up by women artisans, importers, designers and distributors, the expo featured a wide variety of items and reflected a diverse mix of ethnicities and cultures, including African-American, Latina, Asian and Islamic women.

"It's a small United Nations where you meet wonderful people with different tal-



WEAVING A USEFUL NET: Exhibitor Barbara Ringwald of Ringewald Handwoven Wearables displays her wares at the Women's Expo.

ents," said exhibitor Farkhunda Sultana of New Hyde Park, who works full-time for an engineering firm. Her love of art led her to start her own business, Gallery 786, which sells art glass imported from Sweden, Italy, France and Poland, and handmade scarves, kurtas (long tunics) and shawls from India.

According to the Center for Women's Business Research, the number of women-owned businesses in the United States increased by 14 percent in the past five years. Today, nearly half of all privately held U.S. businesses are women-owned. They generate \$2.5 trillion in sales.

See EXPO, Page 54A

Women's expo

EXPO, From Page 6A

Some of that revenue comes from entrepreneurs such as Barbara Ringwald of Cutchogue, who found herself "totally addicted to weaving" 15 years ago. Today, Ringwald Handwoven Wearables sells hand-woven women's clothing, such as scarves, coats and hats. Ringwald, who formerly taught physically handicapped children at the Viscardi School in Albertson, said she stopped working when her newfound passion got in the way.

A few years ago, Huntington resident Madeline Arroyo wrote a story for a Christmas Eve play presented at her church. "People were running down the aisle saying I should publish it," she said. So last year she established her own publishing company, Stairway Publications, which produced her first book, *Calie's Gift*, an original story of friendship and redemption. Arroyo's aim is to continue to produce "quality children's fiction that exemplifies Judeo-Christian values and inspires hope."

Although Peruvian native Nelly M. Valverde's company, Nelly's Alfajores, has been in business for only one year, she seems to have found the recipe for success. The retired Spanish teacher began making caramel-filled gourmet cookies seven years ago. Business comes to her by word of mouth. "They eat, they like it, they call me," explained the Lake Grove resident. She sells nearly 50 dozen Alfajores per week and looks forward to creating different varieties and expanding her business.

A planning committee of 42 representatives from Long Island businesses, educational and cultural institutions and philanthropic organizations helped shape this year's Expo. The committee narrowed down the applicants to the final group based on quality, uniqueness, range of prices and product types. Sponsors included Bank of America (formerly Fleet Bank), Verizon and JPMorgan Chase. "We have a very involved and committed group of sponsors and Planning Committee members," said Jordan.

All proceeds, from corporate sponsorships, exhibitor fees and Expo Directory advertisements, will help support the Long Island Fund's grassroots grant-making program and the Library's Miller Business Resource Center. To further build the women's business skills and connect them to the resources on the Planning Committee, Middle Country Public Library will offer free educational workshops to Expo participants in late winter or early spring.

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