

# our towns



NEWSDAY PHOTO / BILL DAVIS

Shirley Darkeh, standing and Louise Lowe with some of the clothing they will sell at the Middle Country Public Library expo.

**CENTEREACH**

## A showcase for women

# A showcase for female entrepreneurs

## Expo shines spotlight on female entrepreneurs

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As the youngest of the seven children of a dressmaker mother, Shirley Darkeh of Westbury fought against learning to sew. Instead, she studied business administration and finance, became a museum director, later a youth project coordinator.

Now, at 70, she's come back to her roots, joining with her dressmaker sister, Louise Lowe, 82, to design and create a line of clothing accessories.

Sheila Ratis of Lake Grove wanted to work with words but wasn't sure how. A clunky vintage typewriter provided the inspiration.

Now Ratis, 44, creates bracelets, watches, cuff links, earrings and shadow box art



NEWSDAY PHOTO / KEN SPENCER

### Sheila Ratis with her typewriter jewelry

out of antique typewriter keys that spell out messages in many languages.

The women are among 62 Long Island artists and entre-

preneurs of all ages who will be showcasing their products Thursday at the fourth annual Women's Expo at the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach. The object is to provide a marketplace for female entrepreneurs. The show "promotes economic independence for women, many of whom work out of their home," said expo coordinator Barbara Jordan, an assistant librarian. "It also gives the public an opportunity to see all their wonderful work."

The all-day event is a joint

venture with the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls. Proceeds from corporate sponsors and a small exhibitors' fee go toward the fund's grants to women, particularly those who are struggling financially, and to the library's Miller Business Resource Center, which provides advice to local businesses.

Darkeh, director of the African American Museum in Hempstead from 1986 to 1992, helped plan the first Women's Expo in 2001, when the sisters showed their first line. Their ponchos, capes and stoles were snapped up by early shoppers. "We didn't have enough, but we took orders and filled them in two weeks," Darkeh said. The sisters missed the next couple of expos while Lowe recovered from surgery and battled with arthritis.

"They kept asking for us to come back," Darkeh said. This year they're producing their own designs of wool

See VENDORS on G82

### VENDORS from G84

capas and wraps, trimmed with fake fur, sequins, beading, lace or cording, under the label Exquisitely Yours by Lou & Shirl.

"We reminisce about the old times as we work," Darkeh said. Their parents, Horace and Winifred Lowe, a tailor-and-dressmaker team, came to Brooklyn in the early 1920s from St. Vincent. Winifred dressed the seven children with her own designs. Lowe recalled, "We girls would have flower-print dresses with solid color trim, and the boys wore matching print shirts with solid-color pants. When we walked down the street, everyone knew who we were."

Lowe became a dressmaker

at 16, specializing in elaborate beaded lace wedding gowns.

Darkeh, who helped design the African American Museum, later directed a youth program called Project Pride. She now gives Cornell University-sponsored training for human services workers. But she loves to work with her hands, she said, and has filled her home with her designs in curtains and furnishings. Her husband, George, a native of Ghana, is recovering from a stroke. Lowe is widowed.

### Recycled typewriters

Sheila Ratis came out of Stony Brook University with a degree in economics and a desire to be a writer. These days her writing consists of witty, loving or thought-provoking

messages spelled out on jewelry made from the metal-rimmed keys of pre-1950 typewriters, some dating back to 1910. Her product line at the expo is appropriately called Just My Type. "I'm still trying to find a creative use for the typewriter bodies," she said.

Some of the vendors come from other parts of the world and import their products. Born in northern India, the daughter of a diplomat, Farkhunda Sultana traveled over most of the world, always with an eye for art objects. As a single mother putting her son through college, Sultana lives in New Hyde Park and commutes to a job with a Manhattan engineering firm. In recent years, she's turned her "passion

for art" into a small business with private showings. Her Gallery 786 includes handmade art-glass imported from Italy, Austria and Poland and handmade Pashmina shawls.

### A 'mini UN'

"Expo is a place of peace and harmony," she said. "It's a mini-United Nations. People come from all different backgrounds and each is an ambassador of her culture. We learn from each other." In the end, she said, it's "the customer's appreciation of the art pieces that brings the true joy."

The expo will be open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday in the Middle Country Library at 101 Eastwood Blvd., Centereach. Call 631-585-9393, ext. 224.