

LEISURE *Arts &*  
LIFESTYLES

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Women's  
expo



**to be held in Middle Country Library** Page B11

## Women's Expo: a small 'United Nations' comes to MCL

*Over 60 women entrepreneurs are slated to fill the library with unique items*

BY LYNN ZAWACKI

For the past 19 years Farkhunda Sultana has been employed in the marketing department of a Long Island engineering firm. "I deal with clients all day," she said. In addition to her full-time 9 to 5 job, there is another side to Sultana that she says "brings joy to her soul."

Sultana's love of art and design led her to start collecting handmade items and hand painted decorative art glass. Today, she owns her own business, Gallery 786 in New Hyde Park, which sells art glass imported from Sweden, Italy, France and Poland — and handmade scarves, kurtas (hand-embroidered, knee-length tops), shawls and ladies handbags made in India. "Art is my passion," said Sultana. Born in India, she has lived in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Nigeria. She came to the United States in 1970.

Sultana is one of 62 women entrepreneurs whose businesses will be featured at the Women's Expo, a showcase and marketplace of products created or distributed by Long Island women. This year's Expo will be held at Middle Country Public Library, Eastwood Boulevard, in Centereach on Thursday, October 7, from 11 am to 6 pm.

The Women's Expo is a joint initiative of the Long Island Fund for Women & Girls and the Middle Country Library Foundation. The event is sponsored by eight corporations and community orga-

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— MARGARET HARVEY

nizations, including Bank of America (formerly Fleet Bank), Verizon and JPMorgan Chase.

A 42-member planning committee, comprised of representatives from Long Island businesses, educational and cultural institutions and philanthropic organizations, helped shape the Expo. Co-chaired by Margaret Harvey, Long Island Fund for Women & Girls and Janet Jones, Verizon Community Affairs - LI, the committee devoted months of preparation to this year's event.

Potential exhibitors submitted an application, a \$75 fee and pictures of their work. The Expo's selection committee narrowed down the applicants to the final group of 62 based on quality, uniqueness, range of prices and product types.

"It's for women, by women," said Harvey. "It's a wonderful partnership to

be able to highlight women businesses on Long Island and a wonderful vehicle for networking." Shirley Singletary, of Long Island Fund for Women & Girls and also a member of the planning committee, said that the Expo not only provides a forum for women who come from different walks of life to display their products, but also provides educational workshops to prepare them for operating their businesses and connections with planning committee members.

"This is our largest Expo," added Barbara Jordan, Middle Country Public Library's assistant director of community relations. "It started four years ago with 35 women. This year we worked really hard to create a show with diversity of products as well as of women. We're expecting a really big turnout. We had 1,000 attendees last year."

Women exhibitors range in age from those in their 20's to seniors. About one-third hail from Nassau, one-third from the East End and one-third from western Suffolk. "For some women, it's their very first show; some are very experienced," said Jordan, who added that the diverse representation of the women reflects the changing demographics on Long Island. African-American, Hispanic, Islamic and Asian are some of the cultures and ethnicities represented.

Picture a large mosaic, an intricate pattern made of diverse elements. Each colorful piece is separate and distinct but,



*Photo courtesy of the MCL*

Farkhunda Sultana, showcasing her Gallery 786 imported art glass as well as women's shawls and accessories from Kashmir.

when grouped together, they harmonize with each other and reveal a commonality of purpose — and that's the Expo. "It's a small United Nations where you meet wonderful people of different talents," says Sultana. "It gives us the opportunity to interact with multi-talented artists of different backgrounds."

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## Women's Expo

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Vivian Chu from Essence of Elegance in Huntington will be at the show with her pearls, jewelry, beaded handbags and Chinese gift items. Born in Taiwan, Chu moved to the United States in 1983. "My husband is an importer. Every time he went to China he would bring jewelry to me," she said. Describing herself as a "bored housewife," Chu said that one day about eight years ago she told her husband of her interest in starting her own jewelry business. He agreed and she began hosting home parties and doing fashion shows.

Now she travels to China twice a year, where she works with designers to create jewelry made of pearls and semi-precious gemstones. Is she still bored? "I'm too busy," said Chu, who explained that importing the items holds her prices down to an affordable level. "This is very hot," she said, pointing to a stunning necklace and matching bracelet fashioned of crystals, freshwater pearls and gemstones at \$35 for the set.

Maria Strzelec of Smithtown is a mixed media artist new to the Expo this year. Born in Poland, Strzelec came to the United States in 1981. A graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology, she started designing jewelry and doing silver-smithing in 1998. She specializes in metal and creates a three-dimensional design on the metal's surface using an old art form called embossing or repoussé. "You can-

not make a mistake," she explained. Her works are then airbrushed, antiqued and framed. Strzelec attends art shows in the northeast area, where she sells her work. "I travel weekends. It's like a gypsy life. During the week I do my work, so it's a seven-day job."

For Shurie Green of International Tees in Wyandanch, it's her fourth Expo experience. She specializes in African-American merchandise and sells more than 200 items. Green launched her business with silk-screened t-shirts embroidered with the flags of different countries and then expanded her line to include home décor gift items, stained glass and dolls. A former fraud investigator at a bank for 22 years, Green took a severance package from the company and decided to "do art" full-time. "It just took off," she explained. One item is a kinara, a holder with seven candles, which represents the seven principles of Kwanzaa. She uses African mudcloth, a fabric from Mali in West Africa, to achieve striking designs in items such as pillows, throws, foot stools and mirrors.

According to the Center for Women's Business Research, one in 11 adult women owns a business. Women entrepreneurs generate nearly \$2.3 trillion in revenues to the U.S. economy. From 1997 to 2002, the number of women-owned firms in the U.S. grew at twice the rate of all U.S. firms. And the number of minority women-owned firms increased by 32 percent between 1997 and 2002 — four times faster than all U.S. firms.

Beverly Cuevas's business, Celebraciones, Inc. in Lawrence, features baby products appealing to Long Island's growing Latino market. Written in Spanish, the company's line includes baby journals and an assortment of birth announcements, baby shower invitations and birthday party invitations.

And Latinas also are represented at the Expo by the Women's Pan-American Initiative (WPI), a cottage industry that develops the jewelry-making skills of women who come to the Greater Port Jefferson Food Pantry, 90 percent of whom are single with children. These "first-timers" to the Expo are recent immigrants from Central American and South American countries who create handmade silver and semi-precious stone jewelry at affordable prices. Sixty percent of the proceeds are returned to the artisans. The remainder of the profits are used to purchase jewelry supplies and support the food pantry and its programs.

Said director Maryann Bell, who conceived the idea after receiving a gift of handmade silver jewelry from a food pantry patron, "I asked several other patrons if they would be interested in making jewelry and selling it at various local venues. The response was an overwhelming, 'S!'"

"These women work at jobs that service our economy. They clean our clothes as well as our homes and hotel rooms. They provide care for our elderly parents and our young children. They serve and prepare our food. Yet, to most of society, they are invisible," Bell explained. "The mission of our pantry has always been empowerment for our pantry patrons. We are committed to the idea that community spirit and 'working together' works. Original members of WPI are now teaching other women to make earrings and bracelets. WPI not only improves the quality of life for these women and their families but encourages self-reliance, stimulates social interaction, reduces stress on family budgets and creates an 'outlet' for their remarkable jewelry-making skills."

If you're interested in a day of early holiday shopping for unique products and want to promote economic independence for Long Island women, stop by the Women's Expo. Admission is free. All



Photo courtesy of the MCL  
Veteran exhibitor Shurie Green with her line of African-inspired accessories for the home.

proceeds — from corporate sponsorships, exhibitor fees and Expo Directory advertisements — will help support the Long Island Fund's grassroots grantmaking program and the Library's Miller Business Resource Center.

Middle Country Library Director Sandra Feinberg said that the Women's Expo "celebrates the creativity and skills of women in a dynamic setting" and described the event as "just one successful example of how our library tries to create new synergies between the community, the workforce, the family and library resources."

### On the cover:

From left to right, Maria Strzelec, Expo exhibitor; Long Island Fund for Women and Girls board members Shirley Singletary and Margaret Harvey, co-chair of Women's Expo 2004; Farkhunda Sultana, exhibitor; Shurie Green, exhibitor; Vivian Chu, exhibitor; and Luise Weiss, head of Middle Country Library's Miller Business Resource Center.

Photos courtesy of the Middle Country Library