

Women's Expo returns to Middle Country Library

The largest ever, this year's Expo features 71 women entrepreneurs

BY LYNN ZAWACKI

What do a physician, a retired teacher and a children's clothing designer have in common? More than you might think. All are women entrepreneurs exhibiting their wares made from textiles at the at Middle Country Public Library's fifth annual Women's Expo. In fact, for all three, it's their first show ever. These "first-timers" are taking the plunge into the daunting waters of entrepreneurship — with a little bit of help from the Long Island Fund for Women & Girls and the Middle Country Library Foundation, presenters of the Expo.

This year's Expo, the largest ever, features 71 exhibitors. Last year's Expo attracted 65 exhibitors and generated 1,500 visitors, and organizers expect at least that many to flock to this year's event.

Barbara Jordan, Middle Country Library's assistant director of community relations, thinks the Expo reflects two emerging trends. "One is the changing demographics and greater ethnic diversity to be found on Long



Krisztina Skrabonja, left, with her black-on-black ceramics. On right, Adriana Najera Pollack with hand-sewn Argentine dresses.



Photos by Lynn Zawacki

Island. This is translating into more unique products being introduced into this marketplace from their countries of origin," she said. And the other? "Greater numbers of women with full, successful careers, who take another talent or interest of theirs and turn it into a business."

Vendors include Dr. Sharon Liang, assistant professor and attending physician at the Stony Brook Health Sciences Center's School of Medicine. Originally from China, Liang began importing artistic embroidery from Xiang (the Chinese term sometimes used for the province of Hunan) a few years ago.

Chinese folk art embroidery goes back 2,000 years. "My cousin co-founded the China Hunan Embroidery

Museum, and my sister works there," she explained. "I went to visit, saw the museum and thought it would be nice to keep the tradition going and let the American people know about it." Pieces, which can take from one week to several months to make, are all handmade in Xiang using 70 needling techniques, each containing more than 100 colors.

Christine Roelofs spent 30 years in the classroom as an elementary teacher. She'll be bringing handmade fabric pocketbooks, which she designed and sewed, to the Expo. "It's like an adventure for me. I always need a project," she explained.

Roelofs, who has "always sewn," made all her own clothes. "I got started making pocketbooks for myself and

Fifth annual Women's Expo

The fifth annual Women's Expo will be held at the Middle Country Public Library, 101 Eastwood Boulevard, Centereach on Thursday, October 6 from 11 am to 6 pm. Free admission.

What it is:

A marketplace of products created or distributed by Long Island women entrepreneurs.

Who will be there:

More than 70 exhibitors, artisans, importers, designers and distributors. Visitors will receive a directory listing the names, specialties and locations of all vendors within the library.

What you can purchase:

Hundreds of unique products including jewelry, clothing, fine art, pottery, children's items, culturally diverse crafts, gift baskets, household accessories and more.

What the Expo does:

Promotes economic development and networking among women entrepreneurs and women in business and the not-for-profit world.

family members. When you make a lot of pocketbooks, you need a place to market them. How many can you use in your house?" she quipped. And make a lot of pocketbooks she did.

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On the cover:

From left to right, Expo exhibitors Adriana Najera Pollack, Jane Edsall, Krisztina Skrabonja, Sharon X. Liang, M.D., and Christine Roelofs display their wares. Joining them are Elizabeth Malfai, Miller Business Resource Center, Middle Country Public Library, Margaret Harvey, Long Island Fund for Women and Girls and Janet Jones, Verizon Community Affairs. Below is Sharon X. Liang with Chinese folk art.

Photos by Lynn Zawacki

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Women's Expo

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She's bringing more than 100 of them — wristlets, evening purses, regular handbags and backpacks — to sell at her booth at prices ranging from \$9 to \$49. Some are colorful stripes. Some are leopard prints. Some are decorated with beads and tassels. And all are made lovingly by hand.

Adriana Najera of Lake Grove, who was born in Argentina, is introducing a line of fine quality children's clothing in the Argentine/European style to the U.S. market. She designs the dresses herself and then visits Buenos Aires to pick quality fabrics for them. Based on her designs, local dressmakers in Tucuman, Argentina, sew the dresses, some with hand smocking. "Smocking is so traditional in Argentina, I wanted to bring that here," she explained.

For the past two years she's been building an inventory of winter and summer lines. This month, she's launching her company's website. She hopes the Expo will help introduce Adriana Najera Fashions Inc. and that her website will promote the brand. Dresses are

priced at \$45 to \$60.

If you visit the Expo, look for Jane Edsall of Mount Sinai, who creates multi-metal handcrafted jewelry with semi-precious stones. She handpaints the original designs and etches them with nitric acid. This veteran of galleries and juried art shows started making jewelry while living in the south of France in the 1970s and worked in a studio in New Orleans for a year. Now, she has a full-time business on Long Island.

And don't forget to see Krisztina Skrabonja's unusual black-on-black ceramic pottery. You'll find vases, platters, candle holders and candy dishes. "It's a family tradition that I learned and am continuing," said Skrabonja, a Hungarian native, whose company, Trade of the Art, is based in Flushing. The technique is labor intensive and time consuming, she explained, and the process can take up to a month. The pottery is finally smoked and fired in a kiln, which gives it that black color.

"It's all about developing women entrepreneurs," said Janet Jones, Long Island community affairs director for Verizon, a sponsor, and a Middle Country Library Foundation board

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member. "It's a very neutral environment. We provide a lot of support."

"Many are home-based businesses," says Margaret Harvey, of Long Island Fund for Women & Girls. Each spring, she said, Women's Expo sponsors provide educational workshops to help vendors grow and develop their businesses. Those sponsors include Bank of America and 14 others who are lending their support to the event. Expo proceeds help support the fund's grantmaking program and the Middle Country



Photo by Lynn Zawacki

Some of the many products which will be available at this year's Women's Expo in Centereach

Library's Miller Business Resource Center.

Said Skrabonja, "The event seems so well organized. I'm really looking forward to the Expo."

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