

## FEATURE STORY

### Women's EXPO returns to Middle Country Public Library *Long Island women entrepreneurs showcased at annual event*

BY KEVIN REDDING

There's an unattributable quote out there that says, "Behind every successful woman is a tribe of other successful women that have her back." It wouldn't be surprising to learn its source was referring to a certain annual event at the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach.

On Thursday, Oct. 5, for the 17th year in a row, the library will host a diverse group of women entrepreneurs — from artists to chefs to designers to craftspeople and beyond — during its Women's EXPO, a one-day event where they can all network with colleagues, showcase and sell their work at the library and spread the word about their products.

"The expo's really always been about seeing a group of women supporting women," said Elizabeth Malafi, coordinator of Adult Services and the Miller Business Resource Center. "Our planning committee is made up of professional women. We select exhibitors who are women looking to grow their businesses and make new connections. Before and after the exhibit, we try and facilitate those connections."

Malafi said shoppers this year should expect a total of 82 vendors, roughly 25 of whom will be brand new to the EXPO. And whereas last year, somewhere around 2,300 people squeezed into the library, this year's goal is to break 2,500.

"It's going to be a nice balance of women that people come to see every year and also newbies," she said. "That way the new people can be guided by the people that have been here for a while and those who have been here awhile get a nice, new perspective of somebody who might be starting out."

Malafi continued, "I think ultimately people should come out to support women entrepreneurs and the economic engine of Long Island. We need to keep our money local so we're supporting where we live. This is a great opportunity to do that while also shopping for the holidays." Meet some of the vendors at this year's EXPO:

#### Maria Castilla

Coram's Maria Castilla has come a long way since making clothes for her Barbie dolls when she was young. Now, as owner of ImuGifts, her home-based business, Castilla designs unique handmade bags, jewelry and sewn accessories, none of which are remade, her website boasts.

"I love getting to make something spectacular and super unique for someone that nobody else is going to have," Castilla said. "Sometimes you buy something at Target or a retail store and it's not made in America or not made by your neighbors. This is something special I want to share with the community."

Castilla was raised in Bogota, Columbia, and came to the United States when she was 10 years old and, although she always had a love for art, she followed in her father's footsteps by studying hotel management and tourism in college. After several years in that industry, she said, she felt burnt out and was in need of a creative outlet. She began to make her



Maria Castilla with some of her unique products

own products, like soap, and then taught herself to sew through YouTube videos around 2013. Channeling her childhood hobby of making jewelry, she delved into organic handmade beadwork, and soon a business was born.

"I work full-time so this business is mostly during off hours and weekends," said Castilla, who works for a nonprofit helping mentally disabled people function in the community. "It's awesome to

have the opportunity to have the flexibility to work 9 to 5 and then come home and do what I love to do. And my husband is amazingly supportive and helps me do pretty much everything."

Of the EXPO, Castilla said, "It's the most awesome thing ever ... it's nice to know there's something like this on Long Island geared toward women empowerment and creativity." Visit her website at [www.imugifts.com](http://www.imugifts.com).

#### Suzette Montalvo

Suzette Montalvo, the owner and chef of a booming Bay Shore-based Puerto Rican cuisine food truck called ANEWYORICANTHING LTD., took a giant leap of faith in 2015 by quitting her office job to pursue her dream full time. And it's paying off. Montalvo, who was born in Spanish Harlem and grew up in Queens, was always surrounded by her mother's traditional Puerto Rican cooking and soon honed her own skills in the kitchen, eventually selling heritage-style seasonings and drinks at farmers markets in 2012.

After 20 years as a purchasing agent at a building supply company, Montalvo, at 50 years old, decided enough was enough. "I hated my job and I was always trying to figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up," she said with a laugh. "So I took a chance on my dream. I bought a food truck and just focused on making this a business I could live off of. I know I've made a good decision."

Montalvo even recently appeared as one of four competitors on a food truck-oriented episode of the Food Network's "Chopped." Although she wound up on the chopping block, Montalvo said the experience was worthwhile. "It was such a huge opportunity," she said. "I could never have imagined that's where I would've ended up. It's all really bizarre to me how everything's been coming about."

Among the many delicacies Montalvo and her staff of family members — her



Suzette Montalvo in front of her Puerto Rican food truck

husband and three children — serve up to the hungry public are tripleta sandwiches, rice and chicken, empanadas, yucca and coquito, "the Puerto Rican eggnog."

"I love feeding people, it makes me happy," Montalvo said. "People are loving what I'm bringing to the table here. And Puerto Rican food trucks on Long Island — there are no others." For more information, visit [www.anewyoricanthing.com](http://www.anewyoricanthing.com).

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## WOMEN'S EXPO

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### Deborah Urbinati

No matter what state a restaurant's in, there's a good chance that Deborah Urbinati, the owner of The Fifth Season restaurant in Port Jefferson, has worked there at some point. She grew up in Lake Grove and got her first restaurant job at Red Lobster in Stony Brook when she was 18 and, soon after, became a server at Red Robin when it was still in the Smith Haven Mall. "It really helped with my future career because I was taught in a really good way how to be efficient and work with a team," Urbinati said of the early gig.

She eventually moved to Colorado in 1994, where she worked in restaurants and served as a bartender, was promoted to management, coordinated schedules and bounced between a number of eateries. In Maui, Hawaii, she worked at the Hard Rock Cafe and then was a bar manager in

Cannon Beach, Oregon, where she met her husband, the chef at The Fifth Season.

"I've just picked up a lot of knowledge through my travels and now I'm able to bring it here and do what we do at the Fifth Season and it's really cool," she said, describing the Fifth Season's menu as "contemporary food with American ingredients." She runs the front of the house, which includes everything from answering the phone to organizing private events to keeping inventory of the alcohols and overall making sure the flow of service stays up to her standards.

"I'm the conductor," she said. "I'm really good at what I do because I love what I do. I don't ever walk into the restaurant thinking, 'Oh my god, I own this.' I walk into the restaurant and say, 'Oh yeah, this is where I am and this is where I'm supposed to be.'" Visit [www.thefifth-season.com](http://www.thefifth-season.com).

Right, Deborah Urbinati at her restaurant, The Fifth Season



### Loretta Giuliani

Northport resident Loretta Giuliani once carried a badge; now she carries wooden signs. After retiring as a New York City police detective with 20 years under her belt, Giuliani rekindled her artistic roots with Just 4 You, a small, home-based business launched last year wherein she builds, sands and paints custom wooden signs, each decorated with beautiful art or quotes.

"The signs vary in different styles," Giuliani said, specifying that some are large, others are small, and sometimes she repurposes old kitchen cabinet doors for them. "I try to recycle wood into all different kinds. I've also recently starting going to people's

Left, Loretta Giuliani with some of the signs she makes from home.

homes and hosting parties, teaching them how to paint and helping them choose designs and create their own signs." She also said she often builds custom pieces for weddings and baby showers. "It's a wide gamut of everything. Anything goes."

Giuliani grew up in Brooklyn and said she was inspired artistically by everything around her, from graffiti in the subway to exhibits in museums, but most of all by her older brother, a fellow artist.

"Art was just always around me growing up," she said. "It was always a big interest for me." That interest eventually landed her in New York Institute of Technology as a graphic arts major. She said a friend of hers urged her to take the police exam to gauge how she did and, after she passed it, she wound up taking the job.

While Giuliani said being on the police force was a good job, she's happy to be exploring her creative side again.

"I love meeting and speaking with the different people, getting a feel for what they want, and seeing their face when they see the finished product," she said.

For more information on Giuliani's signs, visit [www.facebook.com/just4youbyloretta](http://www.face-book.com/just4youbyloretta).

Admission to the 17th annual Women's EXPO, which runs from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., is free. Lunch will be served in the EXPO cafe, catered by Fifth Season Restaurant of Port Jefferson. The library is located at 101 Eastwood Blvd., Centereach. For a complete list of vendors, visit [www.womensEXPO.org](http://www.womensEXPO.org). For more information call 631-585-9393, ext. 296.

All photos courtesy of MCPI.

