

Women's EXPO celebrates 26th year at Middle Country Public Library

Fall is here, and with it comes one of the North Shore's favorite events: the 26th annual Women's EXPO at the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach. Returning on Thursday, Oct. 1, the EXPO is more than just shopping — it is a celebration of local women, small businesses and the entrepreneurial spirit. It is also an extension of the library's Miller Business Center, which provides resources, programs and support to local entrepreneurs, small-business owners, non-profits and business professionals.

"The Miller Business Center helps those just getting started and those looking for ways to grow. Education, resources and a supportive community can make a real difference," said Sophia Serlis-McPhillips, director of the library. "We're proud to help local entrepreneurs turn their ideas and passions into businesses."

That spirit of community support is at the heart of the Women's EXPO. "Supporting women-owned small businesses means investing in the women who build our communities, create opportunities, and turn their dreams into something that benefits us all," says Ritu Wackett of the Stony Brook Small Business Development Center. "The Women's EXPO is the perfect platform to bring it all to fruition."

EXPO exhibitors, volunteers and attendees feel that community when they attend the event with many saying it is their favorite event of the year because of the atmosphere.

Shopping locally supports small businesses and independent entrepreneurs while helping keep the community vibrant and connected. Gala Foods, a local, family-owned business in Centereach, understands that and makes sure to become part of their community, including supporting the EXPO.

"At Gala Foods, supporting the community we serve is at the very heart of everything we do, without our community, we wouldn't be here," says Rosanna Gutierrez. "We are incredibly proud to sponsor the Women's EXPO because it provides a space for women entrepreneurs to build business, share resources and uplift one another. A space where they feel safe, empowered and supported is truly inspiring and it aligns perfectly with Gala Foods' commitment to helping our neighborhood thrive."

The Women's EXPO offers an opportunity to meet the women behind the businesses, discover something new and support passion and creativity. Let's take a look at a few of the local women entrepreneurs who will be participating.

Olivia Giordano: *The Olive Cottage*

For Olivia Giordano, baking has always been connected to family. She grew up baking with her grandmother, who she says influenced not only her love of baking but also her creative side. It was that creativity that eventually led Giordano to create The Olive Cottage.

While studying graphic design at Penn State, Giordano found herself struggling with anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Baking and decorating cookies became an outlet. "It was kind of a life raft," she said, as decorating cookies was challenging and allowed her to focus on something other than anxiety.

After graduating, Giordano decided to turn something she loved into a business and The Olive Cottage was born. She used her graphic design skills to create her logo and packaging and signed up for her first festival. But Giordano was nervous. "What if it goes terribly?" she remembers thinking. With encouragement from her boyfriend, mother and grandmother, she took the leap. The festival went well, and she gradually began participating in more events and becoming more comfortable putting herself and her business out there.

Today, much of The Olive Cottage's business comes through farmers markets, festivals and other in-person events. What began as an effort to find custom orders has become something Giordano genuinely enjoys.

One of her favorite parts of being a business owner has been meeting people. "My biggest success is meeting so many new people and not letting my shyness get in the way," she said. "It helps me learn a lot of things."

Her custom cookie orders have also allowed her to become part of other people's special moments. One memorable order came from Daniela Allen of Southshop.us, another EXPO exhibitor. Dani's friend's mother was in hospice and had never had the opportunity



to travel to Greece. Giordano created a collection of cookies inspired by Greece and travel.

"I love knowing that my product is part of their story," she said. Giordano hopes to continue expanding her custom orders, particularly those connected to weddings, celebrations and other important life events.

Sarah Milton: *The Island Coffee Grind*

For Sarah Milton, coffee has always been about more than what's in the cup. It's about family, tradition and the little moments that stay with you. Some of her earliest memories involve sitting at her grandfather's kitchen table while he poured coffee over cornflakes with milk. At her grandmother's house, espresso was part of Sunday dinners, served strong and generously.

Years later, those memories would help inspire Milton to create a business of her own.

After being laid off unexpectedly from her corporate job in beauty, she found herself at a crossroads. "What at first felt like a setback became an opportunity for me to become the entrepreneur I've always wanted to be," she says. "I started my business because of my passion for great coffee with high quality ingredients that my community seemed to be lacking." That passion became The Island Coffee Grind, a mobile coffee business bringing specialty drinks and creative flavors to events and communities across Long Island.

Milton spent years exploring coffee shops from Boston to New York City, searching for interesting flavors and combinations which she now brings to her mobile coffee trailer. But for Milton, the goal is to create more than a cup of coffee. Whether customers are grabbing a morning coffee, taking a break or meeting a friend, Milton hopes each cup becomes part of someone's day—and perhaps eventually part of their memories, too.

When asked about her business success, Milton says it's "building a business from an idea into something people genuinely seek out. Seeing customers become regulars and hearing honest



reviews has been incredibly rewarding."

It's a fitting journey for someone whose own business began with memories around a family table and a lifelong appreciation for what a simple cup of coffee can mean.



Polina Burmistrova: *LIVITA, LLC*

Polina Burmistrova took a very different path to entrepreneurship. Trained as a scientist with a Ph.D. in electrical engineering, Burmistrova spent years working in that field before stepping away and discovering a new creative passion.

She began taking painting classes at Studio 268, where her children had attended classes for years. It was her first experience with the fine arts, including oil painting and collage. "Something inside me that was silent came out in a fruitful soil," she said.

Eventually, Burmistrova began looking for a way to bring her artwork off the canvas. "I wanted to bring my art with me," she said. She began experimenting with free-motion embroidery and discovered that she could use thread much like a painter uses a brush. "I was amazed when I tried it," she said. "I can use thread as paint."

That experimentation eventually led her to denim. Burmistrova began taking discarded jeans and transforming them into handbags and functional pieces of art. Her designs often use the back pockets of jeans as part of the purse design. She calls the collection "BUMArt." Rather than allowing the material to end up in a landfill, Burmistrova gives it a second life. Some of her pieces draw inspiration from artists such as Joan Miró and Vincent van Gogh.

Her business began in August 2025, and with help from Ritu Wackett at the Small Business Development Center, she began learning how to turn her artistic passion into a business. "I'm good at the creativity part," she said. "But I needed help with the business side." She officially opened in January 2026.

Her first major milestone came when she sold her piece, The First Hour, after exhibiting at the Reboli Center. Two of her textile art pieces are currently part of the Studio 268 Art Show at the Reboli Center, and she is continuing to expand her work while building an online presence.

For Burmistrova, the possibilities are endless. She hopes to continue creating fine art, incorporate other textile waste into her work, expand into online sales and encourage others to look at everyday materials in a new way. And while the science career may be behind her, the curiosity that came with it remains very much a part of her work. Today, she continues to experiment, combining the precision of her scientific background with the freedom of artistic expression—one piece of denim and one stitch at a time.

Casey Cunningham: *Art and Flowers Custom Design*

For Casey Cunningham, entrepreneurship happened almost by accident. She received a Cricut machine and began experimenting with cardstock flowers. Soon, she was making flowers and participating in small shows. At one of those events, someone asked if she taught classes. Since Cunningham's whole life philosophy is "Say Yes," she did, even though she had never taught a class before.

That first opportunity turned into a library teen program, where participants made flowers from recycled book pages. Today, Cunningham, the owner of Art and Flowers Custom Design, presents programs at more than 40 libraries.

A biology major who once dreamed of becoming a botanist, Cunningham has always loved flowers but never thought she would become an artist. She taught herself how to make crepe-paper flowers through what she jokingly calls the "University of YouTube."

While the majority of her business is through library programs and teaching, Cunningham also creates commemorative flowers. Many are created for local high schools' theatre productions, including flowers made from sheet music, incorporating details about the show. Her work has even made its way to Broadway, where she created opening-night flowers for one of the stars of Jagged Little Pill.

Cunningham's flowers are designed to last, offering an alternative to traditional flowers that eventually fade. They are truly an everlasting keepsake.

When asked where she sees her business going in the next few years, Cunningham said she hopes to expand into home parties and workshops at other venues. At this year's EXPO, she will introduce flower-making kits, including rose kits and children's kits, as well as a "bloom bar."

The Women's EXPO is the only show Cunningham participates in. "For me, it's not about the sales," she said. "It's about the contacts and who I meet along the way who is going to enhance my life in some way." One connection she made at the EXPO led to an invitation to attend meetings with the local Chamber of Commerce.

For Cunningham, those connections are what entrepreneurship is all about. "It's about learning and growing," she said.

She also takes advantage of what's available to her after the EXPO and frequently attends programs at the Miller Center, while encouraging other entrepreneurs to take advantage of its resources. "You create community by going out and joining."



The stories of these women are different, but they share something important: each took an idea, passion or unexpected opportunity and found a way to build something of her own. The Women's EXPO provides a place for those businesses to connect directly with the community—and for shoppers to support the people behind the products.

It is also a reminder that shopping local is about more than making a purchase. It is about meeting the person who made the product, hearing the story behind a business and helping a neighbor pursue a dream. For entrepreneurs like these women, community connections have been an important part of their journeys. And through resources such as the Miller Business Center, the library continues to provide a place where those connections can grow.

This fall, visitors to the Women's EXPO will have an opportunity to shop local, meet local women entrepreneurs and discover the creativity happening right here in their own community. Because when we support local women and local businesses, the impact reaches far beyond a single purchase.

The 26th annual Women's EXPO will take place on Thursday, October 1 at the Middle Country Public Library, 101 Eastwood Blvd, Centereach from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Snacks and lunch will be available for purchase in the EXPO Cafe. Admission is free. For further information, call the library at 631-585-9393 or visit www.womensEXPOli.org.