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DESIGNING WOMEN

By Diane di Costanzo
Photographs by Kit Noble

Artistic women are tuning in their inner CEO — and turning creative pursuits into thriving businesses



THEY WERE ONCE FINANCIERS, nutritionists, Broadway stars and seamstresses to Trappist monks. They lived in Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles and Manhattan. But lives changed and, for some of them, children arrived. Or for whatever reason, their prior professional pursuits just didn't fit anymore. What happened next? These women followed their creative impulses and established cottage industries — several of them, quite literally, in cottages — to design and produce beautiful handmade objects, from jewelry and quilts to paper products and handbags.

Sound idyllic? Our area's designing women feel blessed to miss the mess on the Merritt or Metro-North every weekday morning and evening. They acknowledge that they couldn't do what they do without the luxury of time and support to start a small business that the family, at least at first, doesn't depend on for grocery money. And just as important, they are grateful they had the opportunity to make a change. "So many people stay with a career for their entire lives, never asking themselves what they really want to do," says one of these entrepreneurial women, Lyn Gaylord.

That said, if you think running a small business means you can control the amount of time and energy you devote to the work, think again. They're at work at any hour of the day and night — and during busy seasons, around the clock. As creative people, they found the actual work easy enough but many admitted to struggling over other aspects, including selling into stores across the state or nationwide, moving from a one-woman production to hiring workers and trying to market, publicize and brand their products. Even with the challenges, it appears that more and more Fairfield County residents are creating at-home businesses.

Here, a look at some of our area's designing women.



Susan Beallor

GOLD JEWELRY, WESTPORT

SHE HAS NEVER BEEN “a jewelry person.” “I never wore jewelry until I made my own,” says Susan Beallor. Before moving to Westport in 2001 with her husband and two children, Susan worked as a natural-foods consultant and in film and television production. But a class in goldsmithing changed all that. “I fell in love,” she says, simply. “The feeling of working high-karat gold in your hands, forming and shaping it into beautiful pieces to admire and wear is incredible.”

Susan was also struck, even humbled, by gold’s enduring qualities. “At the Metropolitan Museum of Art there are examples of gold jewelry dating back several thousand years that are still intact,” she

says. She was soon wearing the jewelry she made — and selling it right off her body. “People would stop me on the street,” she recalls. That was the validation she needed to start producing and marketing her work, made in a studio in her home.

Today, Susan is wearing hoop earrings with a circumference the size of a teacup, and so radiant that they have the glancing beauty of sunlight in a child’s hair. Unlike machine-made gold jewelry, which has the rigid, flawless finish of sheet metal,

Susan’s pieces show the touch of a human hand. She uses classic goldsmithing techniques, creating tiny granules and delicate wires. It is time-consuming — indeed, all-consuming — work and she’s contemplating ways to make more and grow big while remaining handmade.

“The creative part is no problem,” she says, speaking for most of the women on these pages. “Artists can sit in a studio all day and create. It’s what they do. But most artists are not business people. Taking the next step can take a long time.”

See it at Kismet in Sconset Square in Westport or call her at 259-5983.

“What I miss about my days in film and television production is the camaraderie of working closely with others toward a common goal. However, life changes, and I would not go back to that time. I have a family now and that way of life was all-consuming in a way that would not allow for the kind of family involvement I want to have.”