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ENTREPRENEURS

RETIRED MILITARY PERSONNEL OPEN BUSINESSES • SILVERSMITH RETURNS TO HER ROOTS •
SUCCESSFULLY JUGGLING SCHOOL AND BUSINESS OWNERSHIP • AND SO MUCH MORE INSIDE!

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Silversmith Returns to Her Roots and Builds a Successful Business

One skilled Adirondack entrepreneur shifted her focus from one successful business to her jewelry-making roots and created a second lucrative business.

By Deb O'Connor

Lisa Nortz has a passion for working with silver.

"It fills me right up," says the Adirondack entrepreneur who five years ago completely reinvented her professional life. She set aside her successful business, the wholesale production of hand-woven baskets, to pursue her first love: designing and crafting fine silver jewelry.

A second-generation silversmith, Nortz now operates her one-woman business, The Silver Bench, from her home off Soft Maple Road near Croghan. She is not only pursuing her own dream, but carrying on a family legacy started by her parents, Butch and Pat Bramhall.

Known throughout New York State and beyond as the Stonehouse Silversmiths, the Bramhalls create baskets, jewelry and other objects made from silver and other metals. Their work has won awards and appeared in exhibits in several states, as well as Canada and Japan.

Nortz credits her parents, who also live near Croghan, for teaching and inspiring her and setting high standards of quality that she strives to match. "I owe about 90 percent of my

success to them," she says.

The first silver piece Nortz ever made was a ring, under the guidance of her dad.

"As a teacher, my father likes people to figure things out for themselves," she explains. And Butch Bramhall strives to make sure lessons are well learned. Once Nortz finished that first piece of silver jewelry she found the teaching wasn't over—her father cut the shank of the ring and told her to repair it. Making it was one thing—but fixing it meant you really knew what you were doing.

Nortz's lessons were well learned, but her creative life soon took a detour. She began making jewelry in 1977, but within a few years she was married to her husband Michael, with two baby boys. Crafting jewelry and then selling

it at shows just wasn't feasible. In 1981, her artistic side found another outlet when a friend got her interested in basket making.

The young mother began weaving



Lisa Nortz traded her lucrative basket-weaving business for a career as a silversmith and now runs another successful business called the Silver Bench.

Adirondack style baskets in her spare time. Within five years she was teaching the craft to others, and by 1991 had published articles in basketry magazines. During the late 1990s, she was selling her work to shops and galleries, focusing on Adirondack pack baskets and fishing creels. L.L. Bean came calling in 1997, and Nortz found herself wholesaling small camp baskets to that company. The following year she began weaving for Pack Basket Catalog, and for the next four years sold her wares to that company.

Sometime during the winter of 2001-2002, Nortz had a vision for silver necklace, and asked her father if he would make it for her. Butch Bramhall, ever the teacher, simply told her that she knew how to make jewelry—she should build it herself.

Nortz got out her tools, and rediscovered silver working with a passion. "Once it was done, it was just so beautiful," she recalls. She was flooded with ideas for more pieces. The reborn silversmith discovered she loved the excitement and challenge of bringing a jewelry design to full realization.

She also was no longer challenged in her basketry business. Weaving baskets for wholesale, Nortz explains, was rote production. She wove the same patterns over and over and over again. Occasionally she would try some creative designs, but no one seemed interested. Silversmithing, she discovered, allowed her to express her artistic side—and people were interested in her designs. It didn't hurt that retail jewelry sales looked to be much more lucrative than wholesale basket making.

Some of Nortz's basket customers saw her early silver pieces and were excited. It didn't take much time for the enterprising artisan to decide to follow her heart in this new, yet very familiar, direction. The Silver Bench was born.

In a work area covering one end of a large open room that also holds her family kitchen and dining area, Nortz hand forges every piece of jewelry. She does not cast anything, building each piece from raw materials that include sterling and fine silver purchased in various widths and sizes of wire, sheets and tubing. Taking the basic silver material she files, hammers, cuts and solders to shape the metal into her beautiful designs.

The stones in her pieces are acquired from rock and mineral dealers, along with glass cabochons purchased directly from glass artists. The only parts of her jewelry that Nortz does not make are clasps and ear hooks. Her equipment consists of a torch, hammers, anvil, pliers, drill, stamping machine, and coping saw.

Nortz considers herself a silversmith, not a jeweler. Chain making is her specialty, and The Silver Bench stocks more than 30 different styles of handmade chain. She also creates cuff bracelets, pendants, earrings, pins, bolos, belt



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buckles and rings. Each piece is made with an artist's attention to detail.

She is especially proud of those designs inspired by the skill she honed during her basket making days— weaving. A signature piece is her miniature Adirondack Pack basket necklace, featuring a pendant that is a tiny replica of the traditional potbelly Adirondack pack, woven from thin silver wire. She also makes a woven chevron cuff bracelet, its intricate design reminiscent of a basket weave.

Nortz sells her jewelry at craft shows, most of them in northern New York, but also as far as Saratoga Springs and Glens Falls. She attends 25 to 30 shows annually, as well as farmers markets in Watertown and Canton. Often on the road four days a week

from late May through September, she also is busy at events through the fall. From January through April she concentrates on building inventory.

The Lewis County silversmith also sells her jewelry on consignment

that she has had a Web site and while she does very little moneymaking through the site (sales do pick up through this venue in November and December), Nortz feels it is a necessary promotional element.

"More people go to the site after seeing me at a show," she explains. "It answers a lot of questions about who I am and what I do, and gives customers a greater appreciation for the work."

The Web site has also helped win customers from as far away as California, Oregon and Washington. Sometimes a vacationer will see her at a craft show and look her up later on the Internet. She believes that as time goes on her Web site sales will grow.

The Silver Bench is one of several of Adirondack craft businesses that

... if you're not sure about what
your business should be?
"Keep looking for something
that really feeds your soul..."

through Lowville's A.D. Present Company. And while she doesn't do a lot of wholesaling, Nortz has sold pieces for resale to several gift shops, including the Adirondack Museum.

The Internet has been a supportive marketing tool. This is the third year

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have formed the Adirondack Artisans Guild at www.adirondackartisansguild.com. The Web site links to the individual sites of Guild members.

Nortz has a mailing list of about 400 customers and estimates that she has sold pieces to more than 1,000 different individuals over the years. The silversmith loves going to craft shows and meeting people who appreciate her work.

"I have very, very loyal customers," says Nortz. "They are the best in the world."

In addition to designing and making new silver jewelry she also does custom work, creating or re-creating a piece to customer specifications.

"Jewelry is really a very personal item," Nortz says. "People can be very sentimental about it." She has created replacements for missing earrings and recast stones from older jewelry into new pieces. Nortz has taken items that have great sentimental value to customers and repaired them, and also has broken down larger pieces of jewelry into smaller ones, so that family members can "share" something that had been owned by a mother or grandmother.

Silversmithing has become a Bramhall-Nortz family tradition, with a third generation now practicing the craft. Nortz's sons Josh and Jeremy both learned the skill from their grandparents when they were young. When their mother made silversmithing her business in 2002, the brothers were so adept that they were able to help her during the early years.

"Whenever I needed anything, they've been willing to pitch in," Nortz says. Now in their mid-20s, the Nortz brothers have both moved on from Croghan. Jeremy lives in Onconta, working for a snowmobile dealership. Josh, who is employed for

a sprinkler equipment company in the Rochester area, continues to practice his silversmithing skills and helps his mother out from time to time.

Nortz works every weekday, as well as those weekends when she is at craft shows. Even at the shows, she keeps her hands busy with a project when not waiting on customers.

"It requires a great deal of discipline," Nortz says. "But if you don't work, you don't get paid." Even during her slow time in the winter, she still works five days a week, but does find time to vacation and snowmobile with her husband. A carpenter with his own business, Wilderness Woodworking, Michael Nortz built the couple's home, as well as furniture that includes his wife's workbench and display units.

Nortz's advice to budding



The Adirondack packbasket woven from thin silver wire, is a signature piece created by The Silver Bench in Croghan.

Continued on page 26

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entrepreneurs is to not under price your wares and to always be professional.

And if you're not sure about what your business should be?

"Keep looking for something that really feeds your soul," Nortz advises. "To have found that, and to then have people pay me for it—I feel so lucky."

For more information about Lisa Nortz and The Silver Bench, call 346-6805 or visit the Web site www.silverbenchcatering.com.

Young Entrepreneur continued from page 17

Manning and Rounds had some additional help during the first couple of months but still, he says it didn't seem like they had any idea what they were doing the first month.


"We had to learn how to do the ordering," he recalls. "Sometimes we ran out of food! Sometimes we still do, but sometimes we can't help it."

The Partridge Den sells wrap-style sandwiches, bagels, drinks and baked items. Because many of the items are bought fresh each day, it's inevitable that a "run" on a particular item on a given day might result in running out. Despite the first month jitters, business came quick. The young eatery already has a "regular" crowd, but not just any regulars.

"We have the best regular crowd around," Manning proudly says, pointing out that the crowd is a mix of locals, visitors to the area and professionals. His business gets a boost by taking St. Lawrence University "campus-wide cards," which are a type of meal card issued by the university that students can use at a few local restaurants as well as on-campus dining facilities.

Now, despite the fact that the entrepreneurially-minded young couple is immersed in running a busy restaurant and going to college full-time (mostly night classes), they are always planning the next step and constantly strategizing ideas to improve business.

The Partridge Den has started offering catering services for small events like meetings. At this point the catering primarily consists of items such as sandwich wrap platters. In addition, Manning is eagerly looking forward to implementing his ideas for live entertainment. He already features local music on Saturdays from 5 to 7 p.m. Acts include folk,




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