

Forever Christmas Store: part Santa, Part Gepetto, All Entrepreneur

by Bend Weekly News Sources

“Will you take our pennies if we buy something?” asked the young girl, shopping after school at Forever Christmas, a new gift and crafts store in rural Christmas Valley, Oregon. She and her friend had been saving their pennies all year to spend on holiday gifts. “None of the other stores will take our pennies,” she reported.

Judy Lynch and Lindy Simmons opened Forever Christmas Gifts and More last May. The women shared more than being part of the Central Oregon Hay Growers Association. Judy had experience selling her own products of Holiday & Home decor. Lindy had owned a fabric business catering to quilters in the area. Their common interests include all types of crafts, strong family values and a desire to serve their communities through volunteering and through their business.

“Of course dear,” Lindy answered the little girl, making light of the mound of 1,400 pennies massed on the counter. Being accommodating is part of what sets this store apart. But there’s more at work here than old fashion values. The availability of items such as jewelry, house wares, T-shirts, Garden Gnomes, embroidery supplies, novelty signs, hand crafted items, help this shop to be a success story. Forever Christmas is part community center, part classroom, part gift store and maybe even part trading post.

According to Judy, the original vision for the shop was to “have a quaint store that provided unique gifts to the community along with fabric for the many quilters.” Lindy freely admits that they wanted to capitalize on the name of Christmas Valley and use this to promote the concept of a Christmas gift shop year round. They wanted to have a gift shop which was tasteful and affordable as well as accessible to the whole community. With some help from Lake County Rural Development Initiatives, Corp. (RDI) and the rural economic development program, Connecting Oregon for Rural Entrepreneurship (CORE) Judy and Lindy were more able to put their business savvy to work in establishing a Christmas influenced gift shop.

Many of the gifts have a Christmas theme to them: unique Christmas ornaments, figurines of Santa and nutcrackers, all grace the shop year round. There are a number of artisans who display their art work for sale exclusively by Forever Christmas. This gives a variety of gift items in a range of prices. There are museum quality sculptures priced in the \$100 range, hand painted wooden plates for just under \$100 and wonderful beaded bottles from \$125 to \$275, as well as hand made color coordinated yarn necklaces for \$12. The variety of gifts: candles and gourmet coffee, leather purses and books about the region to a multitude of fabrics and even fresh flowers, establishes Forever Christmas as a service oriented store.

Along with gifts, this shop offers a variety of unique classes. Students have the opportunity to learn many different craft and art forms including appliqué, ceramic, hand painted nutcrackers and paint in all mediums. The list of instructors includes guest teachers known through the NW. According to Lindy; “There is a strong need within our community for a social outlet, of which our classes are a perfect expression.”

They have made great effort to remember the masculine purchaser as well. For example, the beautiful coyote pelts, purchased from a local craftsman, and an array of tool gift sets go directly to the attention of the male customers. Already Forever Christmas is on the list of "must sees" when friends or family come from out of town. It is apparent that residents within this community carry a sense of pride in the knowledge that there is such a business available.

Lindy and Judy began purchasing gift items to be placed in the shop a year and a half prior to opening. At every event, every holiday trip, every social gathering, the ladies took the opportunity to ask residences about what would be important to them in a shop. When they were ready to put their work into action they then turned to instruction on rural entrepreneurship from RDI.

RDI was instrumental in helping Judy and Lindy to look at the small community marketplace and see the business opportunities that exist. This training also helped them to develop the confidence it took to establish a new business in a rural climate. During several training sessions in the north Lake County area, they learned additional business basics, how to make a company viable, what structure keeps it sustained, and how to help it grow: RDI and CORE were able to teach Judy and Lindy how to "think outside the box." According to Judy, "there was and is so much to learn; the difficulty was finding gift items that cater to our entire customer base. Through the training we were able to discern between age, gender and income differences, which enabled us to solve the difficulty."

ABOUT RDI/CORE: Connecting Oregon for Rural Entrepreneurship (CORE) is a statewide effort to create more visibility and opportunity for rural economic development. Funded by a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant, CORE helps to strengthen and publicize rural entrepreneurship - the growing of small businesses to enhance economic diversity and power in rural Oregon.

The grant targets five rural regions in Oregon: Northeast (Union/Baker/Wallowa Counties); Southeast (Lake County); Central (Warm Springs); Southwest (Douglas/Coos Counties); Central Coast (Lincoln County).

The umbrella for CORE in Oregon is Rural Development Initiatives, Inc (RDI), a private non-profit organization located in Eugene. RDI's mission is to be a catalyst for community vitality in rural areas, working with rural leaders and volunteers to expand the knowledge, skills and networks for building communities.

