

SOUTH WHIDBEY WOMEN IN BUSINESS

PROFILES BY LESLIE KELLY

Mary Donaty: Paradise Found Fiber Farm

For the better part of the past 22-plus years, Mary Donaty has spent her days talking to her “co-workers” even though they never answer her—that is, in a language that any of us would understand.

Donaty is a fiber specialist and her co-workers are also her fiber producers: llamas, alpacas and pygora goats.

“It’s just very special to see the animals and then see something that I’ve made from their fiber,” she said.

With more than two dozen llamas and alpacas and goats on her farm near Clinton, Donaty has more than enough fiber to work with. She produces an array of roving and yarn for others to create with, and she makes hats, scarves, felt tote bags, purses and more.

She sells her wares from the Fiber Shack on her 12-acre farm, just in view of her four-legged co-workers. And twice a day, she takes a break from behind her spinning wheel or sewing machine to go out to the barns and feed her animals.

“This is truly a labor of love,” she said. “There’s a lot of caring for the animals, and then there’s a lot of marketing the products. I do it all.”

Professionally, Donaty had a career in interior design. She was raised just outside of New York City and can’t find any family ties to her love of the rural farm life.

“But I knew from a young age that I wanted to have llamas,” she said. “When I was just 10, I visited a farm in upstate New York and the llama there ate the bow

off my ponytail. Right then I was in love with llamas.”

She went on to marry her husband, Lou, who has a career in the aerospace industry in the Northwest. Mary also worked in the aerospace industry as a manager in the international division. The couple first decided to get a couple of llamas in the mid 1980s, with the intent to breed them for resale.

A new job for Lou took them to California, where they lived for about 10 years with llamas and had an avocado farm. But 11 years ago, they decided that they wanted to move back to the Northwest and bought property on Whidbey Island.

Today, their animals are strictly members of the family, and not for breeding. But they do produce annual or semi-annual shearing, and from that their fiber is sent to be professionally prepared at a fiber mill. That same fiber is sent back to Mary for her to use in making her merchandise.

Some fiber is in roving ready for spinning and some comes back in sheets of felt from which she sews bags and purses. She creates all her own designs, adding beads and always dyeing the fibers’ various colors herself.

“I don’t really start out with a pattern in mind,” she said of her creative works. “I just think about the color combinations and something comes to mind. I create as I go.”

She has sold items and fibers at the Tilth farmers market, but since building

her Fiber Shack at the farm last year, she now sells from home. She is open almost every Saturday and at other times by appointment.

And, if she isn’t busy enough, she also gardens, producing squash, pumpkins, beans, peppers, carrots, tomatoes, onions, garlic and corn, which she sells at the farm when in season. She has chickens and her farm stand includes farm-fresh eggs.

“We get about three dozen eggs a day,” she said. “I have some steady customers who come once a week and then what I have left, I sell along with all the rest of the produce.”

And quite often, when customers stop by, she takes time to show them around the farm and introduce them to Baby Ruth and Paprika (alpacas) and the rest of the llamas and goats. She also gives organized tours of the farm.

Her love of the animals has led her to study their origins and their varieties. She knows their histories and their individual fibers and traits.

She sheers her goats and llamas herself, while she has a professional sheer the alpacas.

“Alpacas are sheared over every square inch of the body surface,” she said. “I leave that to the professionals.”

In all, the animals eat more than 30 tons of hay in a year. Caring for them and cleaning the barns take a lot of her time.

“If I’m not doing something to care for



Mary Donaty

the animals, I’m making something from their fiber,” she said. “It’s pretty much my life. But my husband and I are the kind of people who don’t sit still. We are the worker bees.”

As the holiday season approaches,

Donaty hopes to have new people stop by to see her hand-created items.

“I just want people to know that we are here and know that we want them to come and visit,” she said.