

FRIENDSHIP GROWS WITH CRAFT SHOW

By Rebecca Jones, Special to the Rocky

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They had four kids apiece. They weren't looking to launch careers in business. They just wanted to sell a few of the fun little tole paintings and flower arrangements they enjoyed making.

So Denver housewives Kathy Mathison and Susan Bills, neighbors and best friends, organized a few of their friends to put on a craft show in a nearby clubhouse.

That was 1981. Twenty-six years later, their little craft show has grown into a \$500,000-a-year business that attracts thousands of shoppers and draws artisans from across the country.

It's grown so large that next week's Grandmother's House Boutique Harvest Gift Market will be housed at Denver's Wings Over the Rockies Air and Space Museum, where between 90 and 100 artists will display their wares inside the 44,000-square-foot World War II-era hangar.

But even while their craft show has grown far beyond anything the women imagined in 1981, their philosophy hasn't changed much.

"Because we were stay-at-home moms, we wanted a way for mothers to sell things and provide income for their families but still be at home raising their children," said Mathison, a one-time high school business teacher. "We've helped hundreds of women to do that over the years, to grow their business."

"We also decided we wanted never to go into debt," Bills added. "So we've been creative and figured out how to run our business with cash."

Lyn Mortensen, a Grand Junction artist and children's book author, is one of their most long-standing exhibitors. Known as "the plate lady" because of her signature paintings on plates and goblets, this marks the 25th year she's participated in Grandmother's House Boutique.

"I do very few shows. I'm very selective, and this is a great one to work with," said Mortensen, whose company is called Apple Tree. "It's been a great venue and a great place to display my work. My business has grown a lot because of them."

The show runs Wednesday through Friday. The holiday version of Grandmother's House Boutique will be Nov. 8-10 at Tagawa Garden Center near Parker. And a spring gift market will be April 3-5 at the Phipps Mansion Tennis Pavilion in Denver.

That's 10 days of operation.

But planning for those 10 days easily takes nine months of work, Bills said. And it's still very much a family-run operation, with the children - and now the grandchildren - all lending a hand to tag items, distribute fliers, send out invitations, load merchandise, keep up the Web site and do all the countless chores associated with such a big event.

"It's like setting up a big grand opening at a department store, and then closing after the grand opening," Bills said. "You still have to arrange for taking credit cards, getting insurance; there's crafter relations, getting the facility. Cathy and I pretty much do every aspect of it."

"We feel confident that either of us could run any large event now," Mathison said.

The women realize they have defied all expectations. They never thought their little craft show would turn into lifetime careers. That their friendship has endured is equally amazing to them.

"We took a class several years ago, and we heard that if you were both friends and business partners, in five years max the business would be dead and your friendship would be, too," Mathison said.

"I think we've been successful because we have the same vision," Bills said. "We also have a total trust level. We just seem to want the same things. It's almost like a really good marriage."