

THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Woman makes gear for dolls

The Doll Case Co. has expanded into global production of accessories

Friday, December 30, 2005

BY TOM TOLEN

News Staff Reporter

A Whitmore Lake woman's fast-growing doll accessory company is helping her achieve her dreams of launching a successful business.

Whitmore Lake-area resident Linda Sawyer, who spent her childhood summers at her grandparents' Brighton Township home, designed all of the accessories herself. Sawyer now offers up to 10 different trunk styles and has a U.S. patent on her duffles. She also sells doll houses, doll displays and clothing hangers.

Using an agent, she was able to make the necessary contacts and eventually signed agreements with firms in China, Pakistan and Oregon to manufacture her products. Other than the Pacific Northwest company, all of Sawyer's doll accessories are exported to the United States and stocked in a Las Vegas warehouse. The arrangement enables her to offer her items at affordable prices to her customer base in the U.S. and about 20 foreign countries.

Her firm, the Doll Case Co., has taken off after a few halting first steps. Sawyer says she has hired other people to handle most of her workload, which enables her to continue her work at the University of Michigan Medical Center.

A published researcher, Sawyer also is a registered nurse in the medical center's pulmonary department. Her current research project is titled the "Prospective Investigation of Pulmonary Embolis Diagnosis," which in lay terms means coming up with better ways to diagnose life-threatening blood clots in the lungs.

Sawyer lives a varied and hectic life.

"I have 160,000 frequent-flier miles saved up," she quips, despite a fear of flying stemming from her paramedic days when she was one of the first responders to ill-fated Northwest Airlines Flight 255, which crashed at Detroit Metro Airport in 1987, killing all but one passenger, a 4-year-old girl.

Sawyer's entry into the doll business is a result of having adopted identical twins Rachel and Laura, now 16, from a Russian orphanage 10 years ago. While the adoption papers were being processed they found out the girls had an older sister in a different Russian orphanage, and wanted to adopt her, too, to keep the family together. "We had used every penny we had, and our church held a fundraiser," she says. The amount raised from the event and resultant publicity netted the amount they needed to adopt the third child. "It was exactly what we needed, to the dollar," she says. Between that and other donations they were able to bring back Lubov, whom they renamed Kelly, now 19.

The girls, who had little in the way of material goods while in the orphanages, all received dolls on their first American Christmas but lacked accessories. "All three got dolls, they slept with them and took them wherever they went," she says. Sawyer couldn't find what they wanted at an affordable price and decided to make her own doll trunks. "If your kids want a \$150 doll trunk for Christmas, you need to think out of the box," she says.

Friends who saw the quality of her work urged her to go into business for herself. She contacted Dennis Whitney, director of the Livingston County Small Business and technology Development Center in Brighton, who gave her the advice and tools to start her own company, in 1999. Sawyer credits Whitney for much of her early success. "Dennis helped tremendously, he is a great reference person," she says.

"The product is very nice, and they are very customer-friendly and accommodating," says customer Kathleen Longo of Ann Arbor, who recently purchased two doll cases from Sawyer's company through eBay.

Sawyer's company now has an office in Hong Kong in addition to her new Whitmore Lake office,, which employs five, part-time people. The Doll Case Co. currently makes an estimated 76,000 items a year, a figure Sawyer says she expects will grow rapidly.

For more information on the Doll Case Co., go to www.dollcase.com or call (734) 657-9854.

Tom Tolen can be reached at ttolen@livingstoncommunitynews.com or at (810) 844-2009.