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Ever wonder what it would be like to sell your work at a craft fair? I have. This past month, when I was at a craft fair in Frederick, Maryland, I became curious about what spending time selling work at craft fairs would be like.

Gregarious type that I am, I armed myself with a camera and a pad of paper, and went around interviewing the various polymer clay artists there.

I was lucky -- this was a fairly small show, but there were about half a dozen polymer clay artists (any one else notice the spike in polymer clay booths at craft shows recently?).

Of the six booths dedicated primarily to polymer clay, one was doing a bang up business, with throngs of people waiting in line to buy things, so I decided not to bother the proprietor. The next booth I stopped at wasn't jammed with people, but I didn't get any information there, either, because -- and there is no better way to say this -- the person running the booth freaked out on me. She was not interested in talking at all about anything. I think she thought I was there to steal trade secrets.

Further into the show, I ran into several very delightful people who were all willing to let me take photographs of their work and ask them questions.



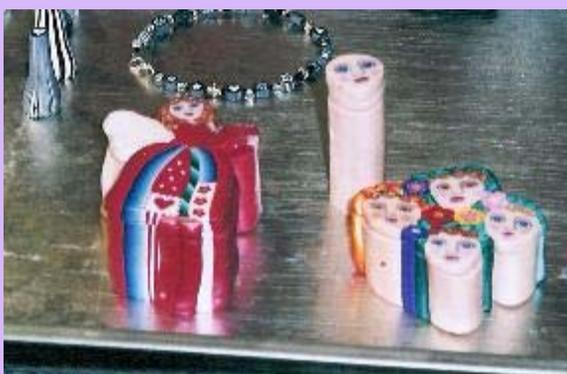
Tiddleywinks

Karyn McCorkle, who runs Tiddleywinks out of Springfield, MO, was the first person I spoke with. Her booth was a simple presentation of three sides filled with polymer clay jewelry.

Karyn, her husband, and her son were all at the booth, taking turns selling Karyn's items and explaining polymer clay to curious customers. Karyn includes in her booth a small stand with a pasta machine, some conditioned clay, and some canes, so she can show and explain the process to anyone who asks.

Karyn creates mostly canned pieces, and her work is precise and very detailed. It takes her anywhere from six to 40 hours to create a cane and can spend up to 10 hours a day working (and she puts her family to work too -- they mix colors for her).

Self-taught, Karyn's been working with polymer clay since 1978, and attends five or six craft fairs a year. She chooses shows over wholesale because the interaction with the customer at shows is much more rewarding for her. And while there is a lot of travel involved in this line of work, Karyn finds the rewards far outweigh any downsides.



Here is an up close example of Karyn's work. She uses FIMO and canework to create earrings, bracelets, necklaces and pins. I feel in love with the angel holding the heart (left), so I bought one of the pins Karyn made from the cane.

Manning Creations



Lynne Manning's booth, Manning Creations, was my next stop. Lynne is from Milton, MA, and traveled 8 hours to attend the craft fair. She registers for about 40 shows a year. Her father, who helps her assemble her work, attends some of the shows for her, which allows her to be represented at more than one craft fair in a given weekend.

When she first attending shows six years ago, Lynne says, people were very curious about polymer clay and asked her many questions. She's finding, however, that these days there are fewer and fewer questions as more people become familiar with the medium.

Lynne enjoys selling her work at craft fairs because she meets the same people at various fairs and has made friends. As well, Lynne enjoys mingling with customers, who can be "very sweet." The downside to the show life is the driving, and the late nights getting home.



Lynne uses any clay she has on hand to mix her own colors and create her earrings, pins, watches, and barrettes. Her work, pictured left, is whimsical and fun.

She brings "tons" of inventory with her to a show, which is good, because when I was there, she had a steady stream of buying customers.



ec ornament

I then made my way to ec ornament, where Eileen Lee, from Gaithersburg, MD, was selling a variety of polymer clay Christmas ornaments.

A 14-year veteran of the craft fair circuit, Eileen downgraded from full-time attendance to only six shows a year. The rest of the time, she runs an arts and crafts camp, where she teaches polymer clay classes to 8 and 9-year-old girls, who "love it."

The positive aspects of selling at craft fairs, says Eileen, include the immediate feedback she receives from customers. She knows which designs aren't selling, but as importantly, she hears praise for her work as well.

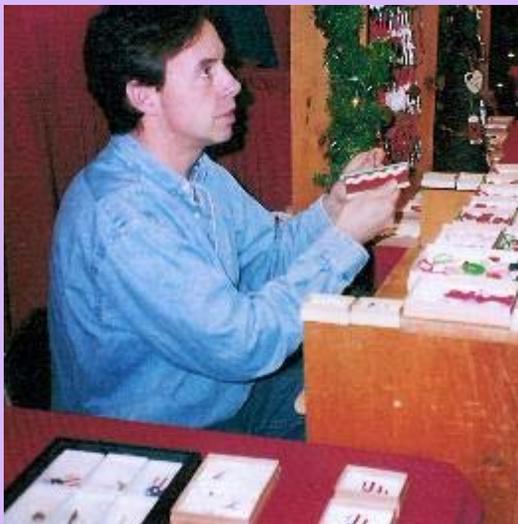
Downsides, however, include limited time with family, and the fact that a crafter is never off work. "There's freedom in one sense," says Eileen, "but a lot less structured family time." Here's one way to spend time together: Eileen's kids help her at home with her work.



Eileen's ornaments were so popular she was quickly running out of inventory. When I arrived, I promptly fell in love with both the jointed Christmas mouse and the old-fashioned Santa Clauses. The Santas come in many different varieties: medieval Santa, patriotic Santa, etc.

Since she was so low on inventory, I placed an order with her assistant, Rose Houghton, for three different ornaments. In the meantime, more customers entered the booth with credit card in hand. Eileen's work strikes a popular chord!

The Country Bear



My final stop was at The Country Bear, where I spoke

with Ray Vigurs. He and his partner, Catalina Vigurs, have attending craft fairs for 10 years. They started out in dough art, but moved over to polymer clay.

It is a full-time business for them, says Ray, and they attend 22 shows a year. They also sell some work wholesale. All the items are designed and handmade by just his partner and him.

The items he was selling this day included personalized Christmas ornaments and patriotic pieces. I had to wait several times during my chat with Ray because a line of customers kept forming. Apparently, personalized decorations are extremely popular -- which Ray knows.

The best part of the business is creating an appealing piece of work. "It's fun to get ideas and images out to the public," says Ray, "to please them." The greatest downside, says Ray, is working with promoters who don't know how to promote shows.

Some advice Ray offered is to apply only to juried shows, where the quality of work is generally better. Also, he says, know what sells and make plenty of stock ahead of time.

Lessons I Learned

- Selling at craft fairs isn't easy. It takes a lot of hard work and dedication. While crafting allows for a more flexible schedule than other career choices, it also requires long days at home and long weekends on the road.
- Talking to customers is a huge benefit of selling at craft fairs, both because you get instant market research about what sells and what doesn't and also because you get a lot of positive comments about your work.
- Creating enough of the right inventory is a skill necessary for survival.
- Not everyone wants to be interviewed (OK, that last one might be more helpful for erstwhile reporters than for crafters).

So You Still Want to Do It, Eh?

There are some pretty good sites out there offering advice on selling your crafts successfully. Here's just a partial list:

- About.com has a fairly extensive area dedicated to [the business of crafting](#). William T. Lasey is your guide to a variety of articles and sites from "Starting a Craft Business 101" to "Craft Supply Search Network."
- [Create For Less](#), a snazzy website that sells crafts supplies at wholesale prices, has an entire section dedicated to advice for craft-business hopefuls.
- [Art Fair Calendar](#) has Fine Art Fair and Craft Show listings. Very efficient and useful!
- [Suite.101.com](#) has a boat-load of articles on starting and promoting a craft business. Simply type "craft show" into the search area on the main page.
- [Craft Marketer](#) is a site that has various books about the crafting business for sale. Check these titles out here then check them out of your local library.