

Porcupine Needles Company (can't)

Clothing artistry proves a

good business venture

Take a cute little porcupine, add a pair of Bermuda shorts and what do you get?

The Porcupine Needles Company.

And for two Belleville women, it's meant full-time careers.

Lise Lindenberg and Shirley Wright, the designers, and Lise's mom Helen, who looks after the paperwork, are gearing up now for a busy Christmas season.

It all began in May, 1987, when Lise and Shirley decided to sell Bermuda shorts on the Farmer's Market for the summer. They were both looking for jobs where they could work for themselves.

They were only in business for two weeks when they added hand-painted shirts — something that quickly became their trademark.

"We sold out every day and then went home and painted some more," explains Lise. "It was just fun and games; we never took it seriously."

But when the summer ended they women decided to pursue the business full-time.

Hand-painted t-shirts were great for summer, but what about the winter months?

Sweatshirts, complete with a band of bright color, were added to the collection.

Today, Lise and Shirley are offering a wide range of hand-painted clothes. Along with their t-shirts and sweat shirts, there's pants, shorts, skirts and jumpers.

Everything is made in heavy, durable cotton. Comfort is the key.

"There's pockets in everything and elastic waists," describes Shirley.

The former fashion design student from Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, Shirley says she likes to turn a shirt into a painting to wear.

"Most people come in with an idea but have no idea about the design. This gives us free reign."

Along with the hand-painted clothes are logo shirts complete with the little porcupine.

There are three facets to Porcupine Needles — wholesale, mail order and retail.

Retail is particularly busy this time of year as Lise and Shirley start travelling most weekends to craft shows.

Earlier this fall, the two women attended the international gift show in Toronto, expanding their wholesale business to stores across Canada.

"It gave us an indication if our product could fly in the market place," says Lise.

The mail order end of their business has been operating for a couple of years. With a limited number of designs — elephants, bikes, flowers, sailboats and cats — they rely heavily on magazine advertising to sell their products.

"We're looking now at coming up with a better idea for our catalogue," Lise notes.

Group orders are also becoming a big part of their business these days as companies order logos and other designs for their shirts. Silk screening and hand-painting is combined for larger orders.

Although Lise and Shirley come up with a variety of creative ideas for their business, Lise says they are always trying to improve.

"We're never content with what we're doing. What people tell us helps us to open up creative channels."

Although running your own business can mean frantic, 18-hour days, the two designers wouldn't have it any other way.

"If it was always constantly the same with no problems, you might as well go out and get a nine-to-five job," says Shirley.

Lise echoes her partner's comments.

"This time of year it really gets crazy; it becomes your whole life."

If you'd like to see Porcupine Needles fashions in person, visit Lise and Shirley at one of the following: a fashion show Oct. 22 at Eastminster United Church; Nov. 4 at the Irish Hall and Nov. 21 to 24 at the Belleville Plaza.