

East meets West in Erin

Local firm bets comfort will be a winner

BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Corie Laraya-Coutts may be a Canadian citizen now, but she has never lost touch with her birthplace in the southern part of the Philippines. From her home in the Orton area, she runs a company called Desalon International Inc. that helps to employ people on her native island of Mindanao.

She speaks often about the lack of job opportunities back in the Philippines. She helps people obtain employment, but the need is so great that once one job is completed she invariably gets questions about the next. "People ask me, 'When are we going to work again?'"

About three years ago, she came up with the idea of selling a pillow unlike the down or synthetic pillows that still command the largest portion of the market. Her pillow would be filled with an all-natural hypoallergenic fibre that's found in the Ceiba or Kapok tree, a tree found in her homeland. She had been attending a trade show in Chicago, and the pillow in her hotel room wasn't right. She couldn't sleep at night, and she began to think of those soft pillows back home that she remembered sleeping on as a child.

Today, her company manufactures the Ceiba Pillow, a pillow made from the seedpod fibres of the Kapok tree. The fibres are used to produce a soft substance that's similar to cotton. During the growing season from January to May, kapok pods are purchased from local farmers and then sent to a manufacturing plant where the product is dried and the seeds removed from the pods. Pillows are filled with the dried kapok fibres and then covered with a cotton ticking or shell.

The product has many health benefits, according to Ms. Laraya-Coutts. Some people may have a sensitivity to kapok fibre, but for most people the fibre minimizes the potential of allergic reactions. Aside from being hypoallergenic, the fibre is also lightweight, resistant to water and decay, non-toxic and odourless, and provides support to the head and neck muscles. The fibres can

actually contour to the shape of someone's head and neck.

The retail value of the pillow is \$120, a price that makes it costlier than some of its competitors. But Ms. Laraya-Coutts says the pillow can last as long as 10 years if not longer. She remembers receiving a call from one customer in Quebec, who had had a pillow filled with the fibre for 25 years. He wanted to get another pillow like it and he had heard about her company.

For the most part, however, people are not aware that there is an alternative to down and synthetic pillows available on the market. Right now, Desalon is focussing on educating people about the product and its benefits. "About 85 per cent of people don't know about Ceiba."

The success of her company is tied closely to her commitment to her people back home. But it's not enough to provide jobs, as Ms. Laraya-Coutts notes. She's interested in playing an important role on many fronts. About two years ago, she decided to investigate the possibility of setting up a newspaper to cover three communities on the island of Mindanao. She wants to empower people and provide an avenue for the free exchange of ideas in a country where people can still feel the weight of coercive politics. The subject is one that has touched her personally since her own brother, who still resides in the Philippines, recently decided to take legal action when his basketball team was forced to concede victory to another team. One member of the other team had ties to a Congressman in the Philippine government.

In a political atmosphere such as this, she says people have become disinterested in politics. She says Filipinos generally "don't tune into listen to politics anymore. They watch Friends and American Idol."

At the moment, she's establishing contacts in the newspaper business in her homeland. She says a community newspaper is something that's badly needed as most news is currently dominated by events in the capitol of Manila, provided

halton happenings

Sunday, August 8

• **Trees and Insects** have a special relationship. Come and see why this interaction is important to the ecology of a forest. The Arboretum, University of Guelph, at the JC Taylor Nature Centre, from 2 to 3:30 pm. Sunday walks are free with a suggested donation of \$3 per person. For more information call The Arboretum at 519-824-4120 ext. 52113.

• **Summer Service** at St. John's United Church, 10 am, 11 Guelph Street, Georgetown. Worship Leader Jim Ball. Refreshments after service. All are welcome! Info: church office 905-877-2531.

• **Acton Leathertown Festival 2004.** Downtown Acton, 11am to 5pm. Live entertainment, artisans corner, crafts, vendors, food and refreshments. Fun for all the family. It's worth the drive...

August 14

• **Everdale Red Skies Community Festival,** Hillsburgh: 12pm-12am. Folk, pop and rock music, organic food and kids activities galore. Fun for the whole family \$30 per person, \$50 for two and \$5.00 for kids. For directions and details go to www.everdale.org

• **Halton Junior Farmers 60th Anniversary Celebration,** Orangeville Fairgrounds.

Sunday, August 15

• **The Tree Family Reunion.** Come for a leisurely stroll through the world of trees and check out different families of woody plants. The Arboretum, University of Guelph, at the JC Taylor Nature Centre, 2 to 3:30 pm. Free with a suggested donation of \$3 per person. For more information call

The Arboretum at 519-824-4120 ext. 52113.

• **Halton County Radial Railway - Work Equipment Day,** 4km rides, 11am-4:30pm, all day grounds admission includes rides. Adult \$9.50, Senior \$8.50, Youth (4-17) \$6.50, 3 & under/over 90 - Free. 13629 Guelph Line, Milton. For more information call 519-856-9802 or www.hcry.org

Saturday, August 28

• **35th Annual Beef BBQ:** Come out to Our Lady of Mount Carmels' annual Beef BBQ, from 4 to 7pm enjoy a delicious meal, plus dessert, a beer garden, live entertainment and draws. 79 Freelon Rd., Freelon. For more info call 905-659-3157.

Sunday, August 29

• **Nature Walk.** An exploration of the habitats around the JC Nature Centre to see what's happening on a late summer day. The Arboretum, University of Guelph, from 2 to 3:30 pm. Sunday walks are free with a suggested donation of \$3 per person. For more information call The Arboretum at 519-824-4120 ext. 52113.

Saturday, November 6

• **St. Paul's United Church Annual Fair in Angel Square,** 123 Main Street, Milton, from 9 am to 3 pm. Get an early start on your Christmas shopping at our fair, which includes three full floors of artisans, vendors, baking and much more. Come hungry and enjoy a homemade lunch from our Angel Café. Wheelchair accessible.

• **Monthly Bridge:** The second Wednesday of each month from 1pm - 4:30pm at St. John's Anglican Church, Guelph Line at 10 Sideroad. Bring a partner and/or call 905-854-2254 or 519-821-8630 for details.

by churches and schools or received as some form of gossip or hearsay.

She does want people to feel free to speak of their concerns, no matter what they are. Her dream is to establish a paper that's accessible to everyone, especially those who feel disenfranchised and without a voice. She says her publication will include the country's three main languages: English which is widely spoken; the Philippine's national language known as Tagalog; and local dialects. It's important, she believes, that her readers feel they can be comfortable reading or writing in the language of their choice. "If a farmer's wife wants to write a letter in her dialect or local language that's fine."

Ultimately, Ms. Laraya-Coutts says she wants to provide more than jobs to Filipinos; she also wants to give them a sense of hope in the future.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Corie Laraya-Coutts displays one of the pillows manufactured by her company, Desalon International Inc.

WARNING

The following gift may contain scenes of comedy, romance or action-adventure.



RATED

The Perfect Gift for any occasion

Always available at SilverCity Mississauga!