

CUSTOMER INTERACTION IS A KEY TO SUCCESS FOR ARTISTS MICHELLE CIARLO-HAYES AND MKC PHOTOGRAPHY

“We love meeting buyers in person at shows,” Michelle Ciarlo-Hayes, owner of MKC Photography, says. “It really helps them see how we display our products and lets us share with them the most successful ways to offer our items in their stores.”

From her Philadelphia studio, Ciarlo-Hayes creates one-of-a-kind art and wares using salvaged wood and paper from damaged library books. She is part of the growing Hand-Made Collective, many of which are featured elsewhere in Giftware News Magazine.

Inspiration for many of her pieces is derived from fables, fairy tales and legends, with her favorites being feisty, daring heroines who engage in daring adventures.

“We really enjoy telling buyers about our process - they love to learn how we turn salvaged wood and discarded library books into something beautiful, and I love to share how I create the artwork featured on all our pieces. When I ship the order to a store, I always include a “cheat sheet” to keep behind the register with information the retailers and their employees can share with their customers (because they

can’t possibly be expected to memorize all the information about each artist/company that they stock) and I also send a 4x6 company/artist biography for display with our creations so that customers can learn about our items as they browse,” Ciarlo-Hayes said.

Finally, every order receives small artist bio cards to send home with each MKC Photography item purchased. “There’s nothing more important than providing customers with a wonderful experience and letting them know they’ve chosen something handmade and eco-friendly. I always follow up with our retailers after they’ve received an order because I like to know what works best for them in terms of selection and display: I’m thrilled when a retailer asks me a question or shares feedback with me!” she said.

MKC Photography began in 2009. “I had a wonderful job as a librarian at a local university and I might never have had the courage to make the leap and start my own business had I not become a mother,” Ciarlo-Hayes said. “It’s never an easy decision to leave a known entity and a steady paycheck, but the chance to raise my children, to eliminate my commute to work, and to become my own boss was too great of a reward not to make the change.”

Ciarlo-Hayes creates in “a lovely little studio on our property that we built ourselves. It’s 140 square feet, which doesn’t sound like much, but I designed it to be incredibly functional for everything I need to do. There’s even space enough for a comfortable chair, a dog bed, and my vintage camera collection.”

Right now, she added, the “we” in MKC Photography consists of Ciarlo-Hayes, her husband, and



Michelle Ciarlo-Hayes outside her Philadelphia studio.

their rescue dog, Spencer.

“I’m the President, CEO, CFO, CCO, and any other title you can imagine, and my husband (who spends his daylight hours as a high school principal) is the carpenter: he cuts all the salvaged wood we use for our art blocks, keychains, and ornaments. Spencer’s roll is that of furry companion and Chaser of Squirrels: he keeps me company all day and makes sure the vegetable

garden outside the studio remains intruder-free. You can find Spencer and I in the studio every day from 9: a.m. to 4 p.m. and occasionally in the evenings - that’s the lovely part about being able to walk to work if you have a few more things to complete after supper,” she said.

Buyers who attend trade shows can find MKC Photography exclusively at NY NOW (Handmade booth #1307) at both the winter



An example of Ciarlo-Hayes work with re-purposed materials.

and summer shows.

“Even though we’re in Philadelphia and there are other events in our area, I find it’s best to focus on NY NOW and not overextend ourselves traveling to all the different wholesale shows. Our boys are still young and there are just so many days we can ask their grandparents to hold down the fort while we’re gone!” she said.

In terms of educating retailers on the value of carrying hand-made items in their stores, Ciarlo-Hayes said, “Customers really want to know where their money is going and who it is supporting. Knowing that they are contributing to the success of two independent businesses (both the brick and mortar store and the artisan who created that item) is a wonderful thing for buyers. They appreciate having that opportunity and, if it’s a gift, they love to then share the story of the item with the recipient.”

When asked about where she sees herself and her business in five years, Ciarlo-Hayes said, “I see myself right here, in my studio,



An example of the beautiful craftsmanship offered by MKC Photography.

creating artwork, continuing to love what I do. I don’t know too many people who can honestly say “I love my job and I can’t wait to go to work every morning” so I’m thrilled that I’m able to say exactly that. I love that every year we’re

growing because the more stores we have that carry our work, the more wood and paper we’ll be able to salvage. In 2017 we saved almost 470 pounds of wood and paper from the landfill, and I can’t wait to do even more this year!”

If you would like to be considered for the “Featured Designer” page in an upcoming issue of Giftware News Magazine, simply email editor@talcott.com, or contact Jim Negen directly at 855-484-7200.