



On Being **BOSSY**

Lessons in Running a Home-Based Crafting Business



By Mandy Troxel

On a small island in the Pacific Northwest, just a couple miles from the ferry landing, is a homestead containing a small flock of sheep. If you were to wander among the fir trees to the fence, the first sheep to greet you would be Bossy. A pronounced roman nose would stretch out to investigate, and you'll get a few choice "baaaa's". Depending on your offerings, she'll either stay close by, or cast you a haughty glance and amble off. The fleece shorn from Bossy and her flock is part of a larger tale of island life, finding its purpose in a cooperative business of three women, aptly named Bossy's Feltworks.



Mandy Troxel, Amy Lum, and Kari Van Gelder (with Lucy and Molly Troxel) are all smiles as the farmer's market season opens

Amy Lum, Kari Van Gelder, and myself, Mandy Troxel, are the crafters behind Bossy's Feltworks of Orcas Island. Orcas is one of four ferry-accessible islands in the San Juans of Washington State. The island is about 57 square miles, and has a population of roughly 4,500, though it is more than double that in the summertime. There are no fast food restaurants, no box stores, no billboards. Orcas does boast one single-screen movie theatre that plays two shows nightly, two and a half gas stations, and a couple of four-way intersections with stop signs, though no stop lights. Moran State Park, offering over 5,000 acres of trails, as well as the surrounding waters and islands, beckon to thousands of vacationers and adventurers each year.

In the Spring of 2006, Amy, Kari and I were all good friends, spending time together as our kids (5 girls collectively, now aged 2 through 7) played. Amy mentioned the growing piles of

sheep fleece in her basement. Kari and I both mused of our dream of earning a home-based income through crafting. We also homeschool our kids, and so whatever happened entailed the girls playing part, or at least being underfoot. Kari came up with the idea of making and selling felted balls. Wool was washed in bathtubs, dyed on stovetops, and the process of wet and needle felting was explored. The felted balls turned out great, and our sights broadened. What about making sheep? More books were consulted, methods rehashed, and the Bossy's Feltworks signature sheep was born. Then came the fateful day when Amy's daughter Rachel requested a pink sheep with a blue head. The resulting critter opened the door to the realization that with a little ingenuity, a whole felted world of real and imaginary animals was possible.

After countless projects involving piles of wool, pipe cleaners and embroidery floss, a

viable business had begun. The three of us formed the perfect business trio: Amy cared for the sheep, Kari had the organizational skills and loved to work up marketing schemes and spreadsheets, and I had a background in desktop publishing and web design. Through encouragement, late nights and watching each other's kids, we managed to debut a website, print business cards, and purchase a season's slot at the local farmer's market.

The island's main industry is tourism. Visitors come in droves from May to October, and shop alongside locals at the Orcas Island Farmer's Market. The market features artisans alongside farmers, and every Saturday during these months the Bossy Booth is in attendance. After three seasons, we enjoy the familiar faces of return customers from near and far who consider Bossy part of their summer. During the off-season, Bossy focuses on the holidays, creating for a local holiday faire and stocking our online shop.

Taking our goods online proved to be one of our biggest growth spurts. We had done some research and discovered Etsy.com, an online venue for buying and selling all things handmade. The Bossy's Feltworks Etsy Shop opened in December 2007 with overflow items from our holiday faire. A mailing list compiled over the summer was notified of our online debut, and the response was so enthusiastic that the shop has become a main focus. The two venues compliment each other, as we enjoy



Buster the lamb poses with a basketful of felted balls.



The barnyard is obviously a main source of inspiration.

person-to-person sales over the summer, and then turn to our online shop for the holiday rush.

We are constantly heartened by the camaraderie of the online crafting community. Via the Bossy's Feltworks website and Etsy shop, promotional opportunities have virtually fallen into Bossy's lap. Bloggers list items in treasuries and online magazines, which is basically free advertising. Occasionally an item has been featured on Etsy's homepage, resulting in a surge of "hits" to the shop. If one had endless computer time and know-how, the opportunities are limitless.

But who has endless time and know-how? When Bossy's Feltworks first began, we received a bit of advice from another local business

owner. The advice was to prepare for the "best case scenario", meaning the possibility that everything could go even better than expected! Running a small craft business means that you are selling and marketing what you make. It seems obvious enough, but if suddenly you have opportunities coming from all sides, you have to remember this, because a person (or even three people) can only make so much. We've had wholesale offers, as well as opportunities that would provide enormous exposure and sales. Our eyes widen, our heads spin, and, again thanks to being a threesome, at least one of us gets a grip on reality and talks the other two down from the clouds.

This is when we again focus on what is central to Bossy's Feltworks. We are mothers, wives,



Felted birds in nests are one of Bossy's favorite Spring items.



The "cascading sheep mobile", inspired during Mandy's pregnancy with Lucy.

homesteaders, gardeners, homeschoolers, involved members of a wider community. Every business decision we make is based on how it affects our families, our friendship, and then finally, our business. After all, these things are all inter-connected. Our business enables us to earn income, as well as provide a creative outlet.

Our friendship keeps us together, bonding us through mutual concern for each other's well being. Our families keep us grounded, providing both encouragement and limits.

Surprisingly, Bossy's is usually a very peaceable, if noisy, kingdom. On a good day, the kids are deeply immersed in some sort of imaginative play involving prairie bonnets and the orchard. Amy, Kari and I sit with our felting at the kitchen table, amidst heaps of wool and pipe cleaners, minding the tea and chocolate.

The dogs snore underfoot, a rooster crows, Bossy baaa's from the pasture. Yes, we occasionally talk big, dreaming of book ideas or television appearances. But more often than not, we talk about what our kids are doing, what's happening in the garden, in town, or even in the White House. Bossy's Feltworks is a significant part of our lives, but is not the only part. And that is just how we like it.

Mandy Troxel is one-third of Bossy's Feltworks, and lives on Orcas Island with her husband Andy, daughters Molly (5) and Lucy (2), and their good old dog Bogart.

Bossy's Feltworks can be found on the web at www.bossysfeltworks.com; their online shop is at www.bossysfeltworks.etsy.com.