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Seashells, transformed

Peninsula artist makes
sea-inspired creations

By PATRICK WEBB
Chinook Observer

SURFSIDE, Wash. — If there was an award for the tidiest artist workshop on the Long Beach Peninsula, Cathy Hamilton would be a strong contender.

Seashells sorted into labeled clear plastic boxes are neatly stored on shelves that rise almost to the ceiling of a converted guest bedroom. Her large flat work surface shows no stains from the industrial-strength glue, a key component of her process.

And she is content.

“I can just sit in here and have the TV on, or the radio, and just enjoy,” Hamilton said. “You have to have a tidy area to work!”

Her Surfside home is adorned throughout with her creations, which include ship’s wheels, mermaids, pelicans and her signature item: kissing seahorses. She stores her completed seashell art on her own walls until it is time for her and her husband, Bob, to box it carefully to ship to a buyer.

In earlier years, Hamilton channeled her creativity into sewing as a relaxation when working in health care administration in Portland. Her family would visit her great aunt and uncle, Grace and Sam Pierson, in Ocean Park, to dig clams and try surf perch fishing.

When her sister, Patty, in Georgia sent her a box of seashells, her creative focus shifted.

Hamilton and her husband, an electrician, lived in St. Helens. As they edged closer to retirement, she developed a passion for creating decorative items using shells. She began with Christmas angels, which she gave to relatives, then shell trees, expanding to ocean-themed items like turtles, crab, octopus, dolphins and starfish. “I would give stuff to family first, she said. “I did some selling and it just kind of took off.”

Now it has turned into a consuming retirement business-hobby. Cathy’s Coastal Creations began online on Etsy in 2012, the year they moved to Ocean Park.

At first she sat on a bed when crafting, but soon realized she needed a dedicated studio-storage room. “I said, ‘Bob, I can’t do this any more. This bedroom has got to go!’”

Starts out a little messy

Florida and Texas are home to many customers; ironically, her shells are bought wholesale from vendors in both those states; she uses some sand dollars she collects on Long Beach.

She enthuses about the process and the reward.

Cut-out shaped wooden boards are first covered with sand, then the shells are positioned and attached using what she calls industrial-strength glue. “It’s easy. Sometimes it’s a little messy, but it’s easy,” she said. “If I don’t have a vision of what I am going to make, I walk away. You have to walk away.”

Customers who view draft designs sometimes suggest slight modifications. “If someone says they want something just like that one, I will try, but it’s never the same,” she said. “It’s like a snowflake — they are never going to be the same.”

Hamilton’s husband is a key player in the venture, though he underplays it. “She certainly has a gift that I don’t,” he said. “She has always had the knack



Photos by Patrick Webb/Chinook Observer

Cathy Hamilton is pictured with some work-in-progress shell ornaments on her work surface. Behind her are some of the many see-through plastic boxes containing shells that will eventually be incorporated in ocean-themed art on sale at Cathy’s Coastal Creations.

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Cathy Hamilton | Long Beach Peninsula artist



Kissing seahorses like these have become among the most popular items to emerge from the Surfside workshop at Cathy’s Coastal Creations.

to create things.”

However, he taught himself wood-working and their home features cabinets and end tables he has fashioned.

In their garage he is in his element, operating a clean, flat motor-driven 6-foot by 6-foot CNC cutting machine that saws the curved wooden back-

grounds for mermaids, anchors, signs and the other items on which the shells will be glued.

CNC stands for Computerized Numerical Control. Its precision provides the couple the ability to vary the size and shape of their designs or change fonts for signs. “It gives me something to occupy my time,” he said.

In pre-COVID years, they both could be found transporting their creations to sell at outdoor fairs and markets. The 2020 pandemic shutdowns meant sales switched entirely to online — and 532 orders.

As seen on Netflix

The creativity on display in their online store attracted attention from filmmakers working on a Netflix mystery series called “The Watcher,” featuring Naomi Watts and Bobby Cannavale.

A production designer bought a 16-inch ship’s wheel, large mermaid designs, various seahorses and signs. “They told me they were for a motel setting,” Hamilton noted when she shared the news with a Facebook group. “I am excited.”

The sale was just like any other online purchase — except for the movie company’s need for her to sign various legal permissions. That unusual success — and positive in-person and online feedback — compels Hamilton to keep going.

“I like making people happy. I have a lot of repeat customers,” she said. “My work is displayed in homes all across the United States and that kind of blows me away.”

Her most memorable customer review described her artwork as “heirloom quality.”

“I am not in it for the money, but it gives us something to do,” she said, running her fingers through identical-sized shells stored in an open basket in her workshop.

“It’s fun to be in here and stand back and look at all the seashells and think, ‘What am I going to pick?’”



LEFT: Mermaids, pelicans, ship’s wheels, crab, octopus and signs are among the wall-hangings that Hamilton creates. She also fashions three-dimensional trees adorned with shells. RIGHT: Most of the shells that Hamilton buys wholesale from vendors in Texas and Florida are whole, but she does incorporate some already cut shells like these into certain art pieces.