



Hooked on Rugs

Personalized Patterns and Customized Equipment for Rug-Making Enthusiasts

When Liz and Jerry Quebe retired from the architectural firm in Chicago where they worked and moved to Soldiers Grove five years ago, they never thought they'd be catering to hookers. That's right. Their lovely custom-built home, located in a beautiful valley along Scenic Rivers Energy Cooperative's lines, is a haven for hookers.

Rug hookers, that is. The business they operate from their home specializes in original patterns and custom-made accessories for people all over the country and even beyond who enjoy the art of rug-making. The company was formed three years ago by Liz and her sister, Martha Reeder, who lives in Rochester, Minnesota. They named the company GoingGray because their maiden name is Gray and because "gray is the natural state of our hair colors," Liz said.

That statement actually says more about the company than any brochure could. GoingGray specializes in whimsical patterns that are often fun and have endless possibilities for personalizing. They sell many patterns as is, straight from the catalogue, but Liz often works with customers to individualize existing designs; for example, she'll tweak a pattern featuring a dog or a cat to resemble the customer's own pet. Once the pattern is finished, she projects it to the desired size and sends it on to Martha, who uses a large light table to transfer the pattern to a backing of linen or monk's cloth.

Jerry's contributions to the company are custom-made cherry wood rug-making frames, which he designed after watching his sister-in-law work on a standard frame that was serviceable but cumbersome. Jerry's frames are not only practical and comfortable, but they're works of art in themselves. In addition, he makes beautiful wooden rug hangers, which he finishes or paints with a unique milk paint, that are designed to hold the rug without compressing the ends and to be hung with ease.

"It's a nice little family affair," Liz said.

Liz and Jerry Quebe in Liz's art studio in their Soldiers Grove home. Jerry designed their home to resemble a series of interconnected farm structures, with the studio based on an eight-sided corn crib and the living area on a tobacco shed.





Family of Hookers

Although GoingGray has only been in business since 2004, rug-making itself is not new to Liz and Martha. Their mother has been making rugs since the 1970s, and Martha's been hooking rugs for the past 10 years. "I come from a long line of hookers," Liz deadpanned.

Liz doesn't make rugs herself, crediting Martha as "the real hooker of the family," but she's always been artistic, having taken art classes in college and painted whenever time allowed.

GoingGray began almost by accident when Martha came up with an idea for a rug pattern based on a design on a coffee mug of laundry hanging from a clothesline. Liz helped her sister draw the pattern, and Martha made a colorful wool rug, which she took to a rug-hooking camp, where artists gather to learn new techniques and hone their skills. Martha's rug was a hit, and she received several inquiries for the pattern.

"We just did a couple more patterns, and before we knew it a business was born," Liz said.

The sisters took their newly formed business to a "Hook In" in Rochester, Minnesota, where vendors sell rug-making accessories and artists can display their work. There, Liz and Martha's patterns, which are a bit different from other rug patterns, gained some visibility.

Whimsical Patterns

"Rug-hooking started out as a very traditional craft and the patterns were very traditional, with flowers and roses and things like that," Liz explained. "Then came a resurgence of very primitive patterns with not much shading—things like flags and pumpkins and very simple designs. Our patterns fall somewhere in between those styles, and they follow more whimsy."

Liz Quebe and her sister, Martha Reeder, with their original rug, Dinner Party, on display at the Fabrication II show at Crossings at Carnegie in Zumbrota, Minnesota, last December. Pictured above are some of GoingGray's patterns, including rugs, runners, and a doubled-sided doll called "Good Day, Bad Day."

For example, one popular pattern called "Neener Neener" is a design of a dog looking up at a taunting squirrel, safely out of reach in a tree branch. "We found that most people like to put their own dog in the picture," Liz said. "I've done three different Neeners."

As requests for such personalized features grew, the sisters discovered a niche in the rug-making community that GoingGray could fill. Each pattern in the catalogue is accompanied by a brief and humorous explanation of the design, in keeping with the company's lighthearted tone, and all requests for personalizing are accommodated.

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Sometimes Liz creates patterns based entirely on a customer's request. One woman recently asked for a pattern for a large rug she's making for her daughter. She had an idea of what images she wanted: her grandchildren's names and birthdates, some way of reflecting the daughter's marriage, and something to depict New York City, where the daughter works. The woman sent Liz a rough drawing with stick figures and a few scribbled notations, and Liz spent about six months researching and drawing, sending drafts back and forth. The result is a detailed pattern featuring the church where the daughter was married and a New York City skyline.

Other Accessories

GoingGray now offers unique accessories along with the patterns. Jerry came up with an idea for an improved frame after watching Martha work on a rug. "She had the rug draped over her lap, and I finally said, 'Isn't that hot?' I thought that if I made a frame I would ventilate the bottom to make it more comfortable to work with," he said.

Jerry also noticed that the grippers, which hold the rug to the frame, were sharp and kept scratching Martha's arms. He thought of recessing the grippers 1/8 of an inch to keep them from scratching.

Armed with these ideas, Jerry built a prototype, which Martha took to another rug-hooking camp where other artists critiqued it. Jerry worked their suggestions into the design, including adding a joint so the surface could be angled to the artist's preference and making the frame collapsible so it could be transported more easily. It was also important to Jerry to make the frames attractive.

"The thing I find with most frames is that they're relatively crude," he said. "They're durable, but they're usually not finished. This is such a tactile art that it's nice to have a nice frame to work."

Jerry also makes smaller, simpler frames that are popular with beginners who may not be ready to pay the full price of the larger frame.

Other Endeavors

GoingGray is not the Quebes' sole post-retirement

career. Since moving to Soldiers Grove, Liz has spent more time painting, and Jerry is an accomplished photographer as well as woodworker. Although Liz doesn't yet market her paintings, she has sold a couple, and Jerry's photography has been used in area tourism publications. They've organized their non-rug-related arts projects under the banner of Trout Creek Studios.

When they're not home creating art, the Quebes are busy promoting art in their community. Liz's marketing

background and Jerry's architectural and project management skills have been put to good use with the Crawford County Tourism Committee, which sponsors the annual Crawford County Arts Festival. Jerry is also president of the Kickapoo Valley Association and has helped steer projects that promote the area as a tourism destination.

Still, Liz and Jerry find time for the hookers. They're hooked on GoingGray.—*Mary Erickson* ■

To learn more about GoingGray, visit www.goinggray.com, or call Liz and Jerry, (608) 624-3600.

Jerry Quebe puts the gripper on a small rug-hooking frame. Inset is the larger frame with moveable joints.





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