

She transforms spuds into jewelry

By Suzie Rollins Singer
Staff writer

Her friends call her the "Potato Lady." And she thinks some of her neighbors may think she's crazy when they glance across their courtyard and see 400 pounds of potatoes on her terrace.

Cathy Ann Rudner doesn't have a passion for eating potatoes, although she says they are the only food she buys. Her primary interest in the uncooked spuds is purely profitable.

Ms. Rudner, 32, transforms potatoes into jewelry and sells it throughout the country. The finished product — in 12 colors, including metallics — don't even resemble the brown and white vegetable.

From her two-bedroom Somerset Park apartment, Ms. Rudner works four to five hours a night creating costume jewelry. By day she teaches kindergarten at Detroit County Day — where her jewelry idea was born.

"TWO YEARS AGO I was teaching the kids a unit on Indians and Thanksgiving, telling them how the Indians used the products of the land to eat. Since they could only eat so much I said they probably dried the rest out and used them at another time," she recalled. "So I told them to put the potatoes out in the sun to dry out. When we were finished I drilled holes through the potatoes and strung them together with cowhide, and wore them around my neck."

Ms. Rudner's necklace vegetables became a conversation piece wherever

she wore them and they turned into lucky charms while she was vacationing in New York.

"There I was walking around town when a buyer from Bloomingdale's asked me what I was wearing and if I could add some beads to them to make them more interesting. She provoked my interest and I came home and found out all I could about dying techniques and chemicals," she said.

TODAY'S REFINED versions of chokers, longer necklaces, hair combs, pins and belts are quite sophisticated. Incorporated with the dried potatoes are cow horns, African pods, ostrich egg shells, sliced Amazon nuts, olive woods, pumpkin, pears and wooden beads.

To assure the wearer she won't smell like a rotten potato or moldy vegetable, all of the ingredients have been given chemical treatments.

"They're translucent, so if one piece chips you can just file it down and no one will ever notice," she said.

Treating the jewelry with care will keep it from becoming potato chips she said, but the wearer need not be half of a rainy day.

"I've worn mine in the rain and snow and nothing has ever happened to them," she testified.

A LOT OF MISTAKES were made before Ms. Rudner harvested her wares, she said.

"I spent months at trial and error. Trying all kinds of dyes. I found I could ruin one potato in 30 seconds. It literally took months and hundreds of pounds



Cathy Rudner models some of her potato jewelry. Her necklace is bronze colored with unusual nuts and wood beads strung in between the dried potatoes. She also wears a pin made from the same materials.

of potatoes to perfect the technique," she said.

Today, one necklace takes about a half hour to complete, but that's because the preparation is one done days and

Student elected to honor group

Carol Barnard of Farmington Hills, has been elected to the Lambda Iota Tau honor society at Lawrence Institute of Technology.

Ms. Barnard, a junior in the mathematics program at LIT, was chosen for membership on the basis of outstanding

months ahead of time. She turns out about 150 long necklaces and 200 hair clips a week.

"I work in seasons. In the summer I dry all my vegetables and buy beads and in the winter I do the dying and stringing," she explained.

WHEN POTATOES are dried they weigh considerably less than when they're baked or french fried. Each choker necklace is strung from a pound of potatoes while longer ones have two pounds. However, when hung around the neck the weight is barely noticeable.

Ms. Rudner's incredible jewelry can be found in numerous stores across the country including Saks Fifth Avenue in Somerset Mall.

Her small-time operation is mushrooming out of her tiny second bedroom where boxes filled with beads and vegetables line the walls. In one corner a small desk folds out of the closet while the finished products hang on a section of one wall.

"Yes, I could very definitely see myself getting bigger. The business has really grown a lot and I'm trying to find more people to represent me on the road and at shows," she said.

academic achievement and participation in student activities.

Each year, LIT names the top students in the junior and senior classes to the honor society to recognize their contributions to the college as well as their scholastic record.

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