

Pair fills gift baskets with goodies

BY SUSAN DEMAGGIO
STAFF WRITER

You just closed on your dream home. You're broke, but jubilant. As you turn the key and walk into the hall, a beautiful gift basket full of cleaning products, plastic bags, paper towels and a colorful dish towel that reads "Home Sweet Home" greets you. What a wonderful surprise from your real estate agent.

And, what a fun way to make a living for the two clever women behind The Giving Spirit Ltd., a gift basket company located in Plymouth's Old Village.

Barb Levengood of Plymouth took a buyout from Sears eight years ago to start the company from her basement. She was joined a few years later by partner Cecilia Hinske of Canton. Together they grew the company into a successful business that not only creates custom gift baskets, but packages gift selections for Michigan manufacturers like

Win Shulers, Sanders and Stroh's.

"People just love to receive Open and Eat baskets full of treats," Hinske said. "They make the perfect gift after funerals, for office parties, when you bring the new baby home. We have gifts from \$4 (like mugs filled with sweets for teachers) on up to infinity. We can accommodate all taste levels and we welcome challenges."

The pair estimate they sell between 3,000 and 4,000 gift baskets each year. The front room of their "shop" at 748 Starkweather serves as a showroom and the back room is an assembly area with coolers that keep perishables fresh until delivery.

Their professional customers include business folk, real estate agents, attorneys and builders who want gift baskets to thank clients. They can offer walk-in customers pre-packaged selections or create special baskets

full of unique items from their shelves.

When a Mary Kay Cosmetics saleswoman needed product baskets for her clients, The Giving Spirit came to the rescue with packages so pretty in pink.

They recently opened a website in the Internet and were amazed to receive their first overseas order from a woman in Brussels, Belgium.

"Watch onlookers whenever a delivery man brings a gift basket to an office," advised Barb. "Everyone follows him to see who's getting the goodies. It's such a festive moment. You just can't beat a basket filled with interesting items when you're in doubt about what to give someone."

The women attend gift basket conferences to stay current in the field, and have even won industry awards for their creations. This year in Chicago they captured honors for the Polar Bear Express design created by Barb for the holidays. At \$250, the presentation makes a delightful gift for either grandma or grandson, with a big white stuffed Polar Bear sitting in a train-shaped basket filled with cookies, candies, drink mixes and a copy of the kid's classic "The Polar Express."

A great homecoming gift might be The Italian Dinner Basket. It's lined with red and white plaid towels holding breadsticks, a jar of Ragu sauce, Mueller's spaghetti and Wishbone salad dressing. Any college student would appreciate the laundry tub filled with popcorn, soft drinks and nachos.

All baskets are filled with American-made food products. Bottles of alcoholic beverages like wine or Bailey's Irish Cream must be furnished by the giver.

For delivery in time for the holidays, orders should be placed soon. Inquiries are welcome at (313) 459-4506.



PHOTO BY LEE CAMPBELL

Wrap it up: Barb Levengood (left) and Cecilia Hinske (right) of The Giving Spirit in Plymouth, can wrap up a basket of treasures for anyone on any occasion



Chock full of charm: The award-winning Polar Bear Express basket, \$250, was created by Levengood.

Help! Send us your munchie recipes

As we put together our holiday gift guides, we're hoping to include a page full of quick, easy recipes that make great gifts to take to school, office, the lab, or an impromptu party.

Specifically, we're looking for reader-tested and touted cookies, drinks, munchie mixes, hors d'oeuvres or dips that do the giver proud.

Along with the recipe, please include your name, address and daytime phone, so we can call with any questions. The Eccentric Newspapers will provide a special gift to each reader whose recipe is chosen for publication in the gift guides.

The deadline for recipes is Tuesday, Nov. 11, 1997. Mail your submission to: Susan DeMaggio, c/o The Birmingham Eccentric, 805 East Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. Or fax them to (248) 644-1314.



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