

CRAFTS

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shops along the way," selling baskets and other crafts. In New York, she recalls, "I'd go up and down the streets and try to take orders."

The business began to grow and McKecuen knew she had tapped into a lucrative market: wholesale manufacturing of handmade, North Carolina crafts.

Word got out, and women literally would show up at the door wanting to sell their crafts. Then, people who didn't know how to make crafts wanted to join.

Soon, a lot of production time was being spent teaching new members how to make crafts. So in 1986, Watermark started the NEED Foundation, an educational nonprofit that trains new and old members in everything from basket-weaving and wood-cutting to button-painting and quilt-making.

And because members are small business owners, classes in tax preparation, product pricing and other self-employment skills are offered.

NEED also functions as a training center for people interested in setting up a cooperative like Watermark. In one recent week, says McKecuen, four Italians, one Hungarian, a few Canadians and two people representing the prince and princess of Spain came to NEED for training in small business organization and marketing strategies. Forty-eight companies in 27 states have set up cooperatives based on the Watermark model.

But Watermark is more than a business, and NEED is more than a training center.

"It's a social agency along with the craft manufacturing," says McKecuen. About 80 percent of the members heard about the cooperative through a battered women's shelter, the food bank or social

services, she says. And in the family-like atmosphere, lending a sympathetic ear or a shoulder to cry on is as important as sharing a new idea for a rag doll or basket.

Bonnie Sawyer hasn't had the problems of many of the Watermark members. Her husband has a steady job and she stays home raising her nine children, but she appreciates what Watermark has done for the women in the area.

"Watermark is fantastic," she says. "They care about people, and there's just a warmness you feel when you deal with anyone there. People have unexpected things happen in their lives, and they all help each other out."

McKecuen says all but about 20 of the co-op members are women.

"We don't exclude men," she says. "It's just that it's easier for them to find some sort of a job than it is for the women."

Not everyone in the co-op is low-income. Debi Peterson wasn't when she joined Watermark a few

years ago, and she isn't now, either. But she would be, she says, were it not for Watermark.

Peterson joined Watermark to make some extra money to pay off her house ahead of schedule. Then her husband lost his job.

"I came into some big contracts at Watermark shortly after his plant closed," says Peterson. She hired her husband, and together they made more than \$40,000 last year. Her husband is still looking for another job, but in the meantime, he's teaching a woodworking class at NEED and he cuts all the wood his wife needs to make her crafts.

Peterson isn't the only Watermark member who joined the business to supplement her family's income, and switched to relying on Watermark paychecks to pay the bills.

"More and more, it's survival because of the bad economy," says McKecuen. "It's getting worse, not better."

Through the NEED Foundation, Watermark in 1990 received a \$150,000, three-year grant from the Ms. Foundation for staff training.

"None of us had ever even taken a computer class before we got that money," McKecuen says. "It moved us up \$3,000 or \$4,000 in sales. It's incredible what that kind of infusion of money can do."

In the past, Watermark has received grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem and the Kathleen Price and Joseph M. Bryan Family Foundation in Greensboro. Now, McKecuen hopes to find the dollars to make NEED an umbrella organization for crafts cooperatives.

"We hope to eventually, if we could find the funding, become an umbrella company for all of these places that are starting up."

For information call (919) 338-0853, or write to Watermark, 150, U.S. Highway 158 East, Camden, N.C. 27921.

OLYMPICS

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sport within Special Olympics.

Dave Lennox, executive director of North Carolina Special Olympics, believes the abilities of people with mental retardation are often underestimated, even by people like himself who work with Special Olympics.

In fact, to help ensure that Special Olympics better reflects the needs of its athletes, he has created the N.C. Special Olympics Athlete Congress. The new entity will enable athletes to have a greater voice in running the state organization.

"If the athletes don't have a say in how [Special Olympics] is going to be run, they won't enjoy it as much," says Quick, president of the congress. "That's why some athletes leave. They don't find anything that they can do."

Attitudes about working with people with mental retardation have changed since Special Olympics was founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver. But for much of that period, athletes have not been asked how the program might better address their needs.

For example, Lennox says, when the first games were held in 1968, the swimming pool was only three feet deep.

"We 'knew' that people with mental retardation couldn't swim," he says.

And there were no team sports early on in the games, because "We 'knew' people with mental retardation couldn't do team sports."

Today, team sports are made up

of athletes with mental retardation, and unified teams enable athletes with mental retardation to compete on the same team with athletes without mental retardation.

"Even those of us who are 'enlightened,' still inadvertently make assumptions," says Lennox. Having regular input from the athletes should help keep the organization responsive to the athlete's needs and concerns.

Athlete input has already been helpful in the ongoing debate over inclusion, says Lennox. Critics of Special Olympics say the organization is outdated because people with mental retardation go to school and hold down jobs. Some, Lennox says, even go so far as to call Special Olympics a circus.

"All of these arguments come from people without mental retardation," he says. "The organization is for the athletes, and they like it. Our view of inclusion is that it ought to be a right in the workplace and in education, but it ought not be mandatory in all aspects of life."

Reid London agrees.

"I think it's the best thing since sliced bread," he says of Special Olympics. London's daughter Tisha, who has Down's Syndrome, will be 14 years old in August. She trains in swimming and bicycle riding, but her love is gymnastics. Last year, she won first place in the all-around competition at the state Special Olympic games.

"She loves it," says London. "And we love the opportunity that it opens up to her to fit into society and learn about competition and learn how it is to be in a world that she feels normal in."

"We are the minorities when we are with the athletes," says London, who along with his wife is a gymnastic coach for Special Olympics. "It's their world and it gives them that feeling of not being looked at differently."

Self-esteem is the most important benefit of an athlete's participation in Special Olympics, says Lennox. Competition is structured so that people of similar age and ability compete against one another, with fair competition as the goal.

Lennox cites a comment by a Special Olympics athlete to illustrate the value of Special Olympics.

"You all are talking about this integration stuff," the athlete said. "I play both Special Olympics and integrated softball. I play integrated to make my mother feel better. But don't think we don't realize there are two people in right field when we are in right field. If I want to have fun, I play Special Olympics."

So does Tisha.

Says London of his daughter: "When she won the all-around last year we couldn't get her off the podium. She didn't want the moment to end. She owned that place. You could see it."

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