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Seeing the Light: For six 'Wired Women,' creativity comes in all sorts of shades

By Rogin Fogel

Gathering in a small studio space in Fremont, the group of six women includes a former ballet dancer, a breast-cancer survivor and a designer who once made ends meet by coloring between the lines for Marvel Comics. It might seem the makings of a monthly book group complete with homemade salads and other tasty potluck dishes, but the common thread connecting these women is spun from electrical wire.

They are the **Wired Women**, a creative collaborative of designers who come together

each month not only to dine but to share, encourage and commiserate about life and lighting. Between them, their clients include retail establishments such as Nordstrom, local restaurants and spas, and a host of private customers who have been drawn to the way each of them captures light and funnels electrical energy in her own luminous style.

"We call it the lamp support group," says Diane Graves, a former jewelry designer who creates one-of-a-kind lamps from found objects. It was Graves who got the whole thing started after meeting her "lamp mentor," Wendy Tomkins, at Hansen Lamp & Shade in Seattle. After hearing about two of Tomkins' friends who made lamps, and also contacting Jil Smith, whom she saw profiled in a magazine, Graves thought they all should meet. "I had an idea that we should have a little society. We had a little breakfast meeting, then another meeting at Jil's studio with Stacy (Lewars) and Kate (Kilpatrick). It was all based on the fact that I was working in the basement of my house, and I was just a little bit lonely."

"I came into the meeting very suspicious. I wasn't quite sure, but then it just flowed," adds Lewars, who specializes in creating large-scale pendants from silk, like the lighting she designed for the Teatro ZinZanni dinner theater. She creates a variety of other lighting fixtures as well. "We are totally organic. We don't have a mission or plan a vision." There's not a traditional business plan to be found among them.

"We just kind of clicked," says Joan Bazaz, the last to join the group. Bazaz started out as a glass artist and translated her work to lighting when people began holding her tableware up to the light. "We're each creative one-person shops," she says. "We design, we fabricate, do our bookkeeping and do all the small things that a small business does to stay alive. We remind each other — have you gone to so-and-so architect — and we give each other that little gentle nudge."

That nudge includes organizing the collective to participate in a variety of different shows, such as the Seattle Interior Show, and try other marketing ideas. "Joan got us to focus our energy," notes Kilpatrick, who began as a graphic artist and now designs nature-inspired lights for private residences, restaurants and health spas. In an interesting juxtaposition with the natural, Zen-like quality of her work, Kilpatrick is also the group's computer whiz; she built the group's Web site (www.wiredwomenseattle.com).

Whether because of individual personalities or group dynamics or both, each of the women has emerged with her own roles and responsibilities in the group. All agree that Tompkins' job is to be their conduit. She has the knowledge, information and connections, says Lewars. "She just knows who to call." She can also build a lamp out of anything.

"I can walk through anyone's house and find something to turn into a lamp," Tompkins says. She began gathering her knowledge when she started working at Hansen years

ago, leaving ballet for a job that could better fit her kids' schedule.

Smith is the most established member of the group, having done a variety of work for large restaurants such as the Dahlia Lounge and retail clients as varied as Nordstrom and PCC. She creates distinctively patterned lamp shades on handmade rice paper. Her peers consider her the most eccentric among them. "I don't seem to have an office gene," she confesses. "So I was always looking around for a reasonable way to make a living. I stumbled into designing lamp shades." Smith is credited with giving the group its name after they had been struggling to find a suitable one.

"At the first meetings, I said we have to have a name," says Graves. "It took us literally a year. Names like Bulb Babes ... Ladies of the Light, Lamp Club. Finally we signed up for a trade show as **Wired Women**."

The umbrella arrangement allows them to benefit from the shared wisdom of 39 years of creative experiences — which also happens to be the average age of the women. "We're more powerful as a group than we are as individuals," notes Smith.

Aside from the personal and creative support system, the women often collaborate with one another professionally, as well as refer each other for projects and commissions. "We market each other better than we market ourselves," says Lewars. "Within the group, there isn't any lighting need we couldn't handle."

Many a naked light bulb waits to be dressed in this city blessed with lengthy winters and soggy springs. "You can get away from the plain, white lamp shade," urges Tomkins. "We have such long, dark days, and most people have inadequate lighting in their homes. They have too few lamps."

"Our work is not done," Smith says with a smile.

Well then, let there be light.

To take another look

To see more lighting by the **Wired Women**, check out their Web site at www.wiredwomenseattle.com or call 206-669-2855.

Robin Fogel Avni is a free-lance writer specializing in lifestyle issues and trends affected by technology. Her e-mail address is robinavni@msn.com.