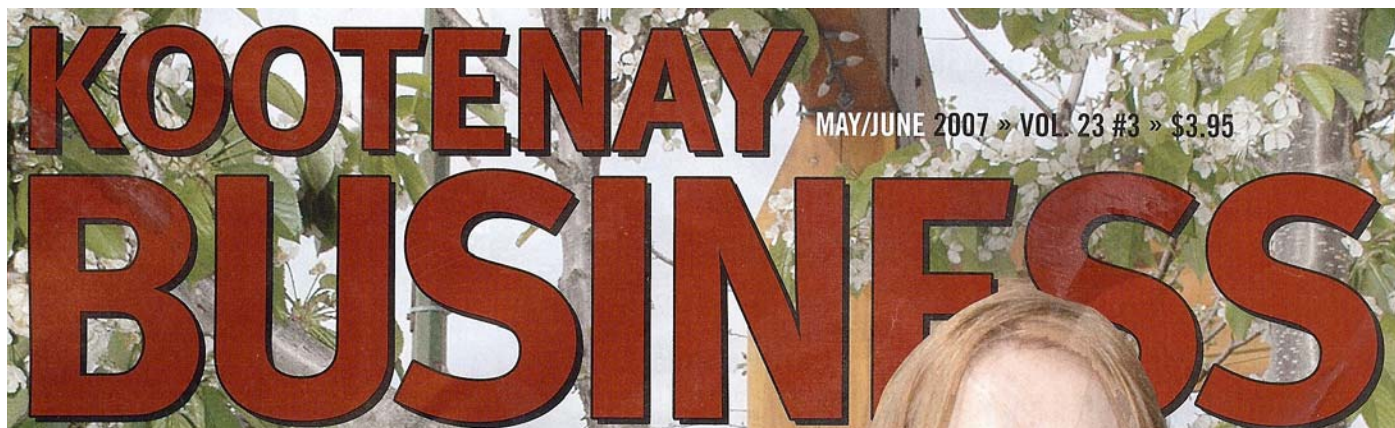


Quote of the month | “I love to see the look of joy on their faces; it is also nice to sew for someone else who has been through a tragic situation — I can relate to how they feel” Rita Crawford, owner of Kootenay Custom Quilting, talking about people’s response to her photo memory quilts.



SMALL BUSINESS

Healing from tragedy with quilts

A Castlegar woman’s tragic loss inspires a unique venture

by KRIS DICKESON

Rita Crawford, founder of Kootenay Custom Quilting, refers to herself as a sewaholic with an intense passion for sewing. Her mom taught her the skill in her childhood and Crawford remembers this as bonding time. In the early '90s, Crawford tried her hand at quilting but found it took too much time, so went back to sewing.

Then one day in 2004, while living in the Lower Mainland, Crawford watched in horror as her stepson Kristopher was run over by a dumptruck while riding his bike.

“Kristopher’s death was very hard to deal with and our new reality was difficult,” Crawford said. “It is not in my nature to join a group and share my feelings and grief. Being a seamstress, it was only natural I did more sewing than I had done in a long time.”

It was four months later that Crawford was inspired to make a quilt commemorating Kristopher’s life.

“I remember it so clearly,” Crawford said. “I was walking through the mall and the idea hit me, and I knew this project would help me heal . . . I also made the decision to keep the photo memory quilt a secret and give it to Kristopher’s dad (her fiancé) for Christmas.”

Crawford managed to complete the quilt in several months, which provided



PHOTO COURTESY RITA CRAWFORD

STITCHING MEMORIES: The quilt pictured above, created by Rita Crawford in remembrance of her stepson, was the inspiration for Kootenay Custom Quilting.

her with the opportunity and time to come to terms with her loss.

“It was emotional as I went through the photos of Kristopher,” she said. “I became engulfed in the project and this cleared my mind and was a release of emotion for me.”

In May 2005, Crawford and her family moved to Castlegar; not long after, with the help of Community Futures Devel-

opment Corporation in Nelson, she started up her own photo memory quilt business, Kootenay Custom Quilting.

The process of creating a photo quilt entails the use of letter-sized photo fabric. Crawford enlarges and edits the photos on her computer, then feeds the fabric through a computer printer that uses specialized ink. Next, the fabric photos are cut into symmetrical shapes to fit a pattern. Kootenay Custom Quilting creates about 20 quilts per year and has expanded to sewing pillows and encompassing other memory themes such as birth announcements, weddings, birthdays, pets and graduations.

Crawford has spent the last year completing an array of designs, but the quilt closest to her heart is still the one she sewed for Kristopher.

“It will always be special to me,” she said, “but I also see how special each quilt is to each client. I love to see the look of joy on their faces. It is also nice to sew for someone else who has been through a tragic situation. I can relate to how they feel.”

Although content with how her business is currently running, Crawford is looking into outsourcing her talent by selling photos printed on the photo fabric to other quilters. She is also interested in working on projects with other quilters. However, Crawford will be busier than usual in the coming months—she is expecting a baby. Perhaps if it is a girl, the sewing tradition in Crawford’s family will be passed on to another generation. **KB**