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INSIDE



**MEET THE  
PEOPLE OF  
SPINDLYVILLE**

A Sarasota artist created the village of little people for a line of greeting cards that retailers say should thrive commercially. **Page 10**



STAFF PHOTO / E. SKYLAR LITHELAND / elaine.skylar@heraldtribune.com

Sheila Sons' Spindlyville, drawn in her home office in Sarasota, is a full line of 65 greeting cards for all occasions and events.

THE  
**'MAYOR'**  
OF  
*Spindlyville*



# Sheila Sons has big dreams for the little people on her cards

By STEPHEN FRATER

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## SPINDLYVILLE

The boss of Spindlyville can devote only Fridays to the obscure little village.

On the last workday of each week, graphic artist Sheila Sons flees to a "tiny sunlit cottage" in her Sarasota backyard, where her pencils, paper, black ink, colored markers and itsy-bitsy illustrated townspeople await.

Her drawing studio has no phone, computer or Internet. It is here that Sons breathes life into her subjects.

Spindlyville is a one-industry town — and the industry is greeting cards.

Sons, 34, has imagined and drawn a tiny hamlet where serenity, harmony and friendship rule.

It is a fledgling stationery products and greeting card business — competing in a brutal Darwinian cottage industry of small artists where sweetness and light take a back seat to inventory management, marketing reps, production, packaging, licensing, display and distribution.

Sons is blond and wide-eyed and radiates good will, but she has a head for deals as well as a focused, low-key organized intensity.

She is married to Ken Sons, a local stand-up comedian and development director of Children First, a Head Start program.

Sheila Sons studied art at the Ringling School of Art and Design, but also boned up on finance during her earlier studies at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

Local greeting card and stationery retailers are betting that her combination of skill sets will help Spindlyville thrive as a commercial entity.

### Hardworking and playful

It took three years of Friday sketching to flesh it out.

Sons already owns She Designs Inc., a successful, 12-year-old, one-woman graphic design studio with clients including the Out-of-Door Academy, Michael's on East, LifeLink of Florida, the Ringling Museum, the Founders Club, Children First, the New Horizons Group and the related but now defunct Jade Homes.

While her Sarasota graphic design company pays

PLEASE SEE CARDS ON 3D



When life hands you lemons...



Let it Snow!

# A passion for drawing and little things leads to Spindlyville line

## CARDS FROM ID

the bills, Sons' heart and hopes reside in Spindlyville.

She has trademarked Spindlyville and branded a line of stationery products including greeting cards, recipe cards, gift tags, note pads, stickers and note cards. It is a full line of 65 greeting cards for all types of occasions and events. It's also a virtual destination at [www.spindlyville.com](http://www.spindlyville.com).

Her tiny cottage-studio is a reminder of a small playhouse she had as a young girl in rural North Dakota, where she spent hours drawing little people.

"I remembered and missed the little playhouse to which I would escape," she said.

With husband Ken, Sons made plans for the new "playhouse-studio" in the backyard.

It is now the capital of Spindlyville, where dozens of Spindly characters live, each a friendly individual with spindly legs, attitude and style.

"They are drawn life-sized," quips Sons of the original artwork. "They are all about 4 or 5 inches tall."

A Spindly can comfortably recline in a coffee cup or a martini glass, but must lift olives or strawberries with both hands.

"It's a colorful, sweet place with an innocent feel to it. They are little people in a big world," she said.

They live, work and play there, Sons said, but "in spite of their small size, each Spindly has a very big and important job — delivering heartfelt messages of love and friendship to people near and far."

That sentiment from most entrepreneurs looking to make money would cause many a jaded person a sweetness overdose, but somehow, from Sons, it rings true.

### Small-town girl dreams big

Sons is a true "Midwest girl," said her friend and print-

er, John Masio of Target Graphics in Sarasota. "She's genuine."

Sons grew up in rural Abercrombie, N.D., which registered 296 residents in 138 households in the 2000 U.S. Census.

As a child, creating little stuff out of construction paper was her passion. "Put a stack of paper in my hands and I was happy," she said.

She recalls many hours of "following my imagination through make-believe worlds with no rules and endless possibilities. My family had the small playhouse in our yard in North Dakota where I grew up. When I stepped through the door of that little house, a whole new world was always there to greet me."

She spent hours drawing characters and making up stories. One theme she often visited had to do with "anything small."

Sons has always loved little things. In her playhouse, she made tiny books, miniature cards and envelopes that were no larger "than the size of my thumbnail."

"I would imagine and draw the tiny people who could use these little things and the tiny world they lived in," she said.

Last May, Sheila took Spindlyville to the National Stationery Show in New York. It got interest from several quarters, including potential customers in Japan.

Sons is lining up distributors and has already printed up about 1,000 pieces of each item, or \$140,000 worth of retail inventory. She has invested three years and about \$30,000 in cash to date.

So far, the line is sold locally by such Sarasota County retailers as The Persnickity Cat & Co., Wonderland, Write-on Sarasota, Heart's Desire and Fraser's On the Avenue. It also is available online.

### 'Great potential'

Kirsten Schmidt, The Per-

snickity Cat's owner, said the Spindlyville line is "a little different. It stands out and has been well-received by customers. It has great potential."

Schmidt describes Sons as "soft-spoken, well-informed, very sharp and accommodating," but the store owner also reflects on the huge challenge facing the artist.

"There are millions of small greeting card lines," Schmidt said, adding that besides being a good artist, Sons is "a smart businesswoman."

Besides the art and marketing, Sons has successfully addressed production, physical distribution, packaging, displays, bar codes, standardization of sizes and finding suppliers of raw materials.

Like Schmidt, Masio recognizes how hard it will be for Sons to break into the greeting card market. But he also thinks Sons has as good a shot as anyone because hers "is a great idea."

The potential for tiny Spindlyville, the corporation, is huge.

A role model for Sons is Mary Engelbreit, a St. Louis-based artist and entrepreneur who started a greeting card line in a home studio with a handful of cards about 20 years ago.

Today, it's a \$100 million conglomerate with a range of licensed products that stretch from cards and calendars to dinnerware and fabric.

There also is a successful retail store in Engelbreit's hometown, an award-winning magazine, more than 150 book titles published, and hundreds of millions of greeting cards sold.

People magazine dubbed Engelbreit "a Norman Rockwell for our times." Rockwell also happens to be another of Sons' heroes.

Sons likes to quote Rockwell's explanation of the appeal of his art: "Even though the world isn't ideal, it should be."

Like Spindlyville.