

BUSY BEE

For Cynthia Werts, remodeling homes and minding bees are all in a day's work

BY LAURIE GRANIERI • STAFF WRITER • APRIL 13, 2008

Cynthia Werts relishes a good mystery. After all, this is a woman who christened one of her cats "Mycroft" in deference to Sherlock Holmes' older brother.

And as the owner of Househandy, a home-remodeling business based out of the North Brunswick ranch house she shares with Bill Coniglio on the grounds of his How Lane Farm and Garden Center, Werts solves mysteries all the time.

"Bill and I will sit up at night and say, "That lady who called . . .?" — we love hypothesizing" about home repairs. "You're solving problems. That's what keeps my attention," she says.



Today's mystery: a shower stall in Highland Park. It's been shedding tiles.

"This is called using your nose to fix," says Werts, 52, who claims she was the first female at Princeton High School to take two semesters of wood shop. She taps the wall, listens and pries off a few tiles. She suspects moisture formed because of some missing grout or caulk.

"If it wasn't for water, I wouldn't have any work — water, gravity, usage . . .," Werts explains from her spot in the shower.

Queen bee

Like all good sleuths, Werts relies on her senses. She understands the value of looking and listening.

Werts has been putting her senses to work since she was 7. That's when she began helping her dad around the house, tinkering with lamps, fixing dripping faucets and building a bookcase.



"It's observing," says Werts, a rosy-complexioned woman with wavy blond hair pulled into a pony tail. "It's totally, completely knowing what things mean. Observing whether things are square or crooked tells you whether a door closes anymore. Diagnosis is done by scientific observations." Werts, the oldest of three children, grew up around professional observers: Her father was a research statistician with a background in engineering; her mother was a psychiatric social worker.

And in Werts' efforts as a beekeeper — she has kept hives for six years and leaves a jar of honey for all her customers — she is reminded that "it's all about observation" as she keeps an eye out for signs of disease, mites, moth infestation and overpopulation. It can't hurt that Coniglio is first vice president of the New Jersey Beekeepers Association.

Werts says she became "entranced" by bees and the intricacy of the bee society when a fellow remodeling contractor/beekeeper — yes, there are others — told her about his hobby. She apprenticed for a while and then received two colonies with queen bees that had originated in Southern Italy. She has since introduced a Carniolan queen, from Hungary. These days, she keeps four hives and is working on a recipe for a creamed honey spread.

"I was fascinated by how complex it is," she writes a few days later in an [e-mail](#). "The queen lives for up to four years. The workers live just three weeks to several months. They work together to survive the winters, live in the dark, communicate by dances and pheromones."

Werts claims she's been stung "lots of times. They're very reluctant to sting. They only sting when you go in their hive.

"People say, 'Are your bees aggressive?' " says Werts, who conducts school tours of the hives. "I say, 'No, they're defensive.' "

Inside job

Werts majored in landscape architecture at Rutgers University. But these days she spends most of her time indoors, remodeling kitchens and bathrooms, doing carpentry, repairing walls, removing wallpaper, installing windows and doors, prepping homes for sale, tearing up and hauling carpeting and other jobs.

She claims being a woman in a male-dominated profession hasn't been a liability.

"Occasionally, someone will say, 'That's heavy,' or, 'I didn't know a woman could do that,' " Werts admits.

She started the business 15 years ago, transforming an interest into a business.

"The neighbors used to call and say, 'Help! The water heater won't turn on,' 'The toilet is running,' " she says. " . . . My neighbor said, 'You've gotta start charging.' "

Werts says she learned on the job, working as the super of her mother's three-family house in Highland Park, scouring a do-it-yourself guidebook and picking the brains of the employees at the now-defunct Berman's Hardware.

"Finally, you'd get it," she says. " . . . You'd fail a couple times and then succeed. You can't learn it any other way but on the job. Everything is unpredictable."

Werts seems capable of taking things as they come, perhaps because she grew up moving every four or five years as her father changed jobs, bumping around from North Carolina to Iowa, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Illinois.

Moving so much wasn't always easy, Werts says, but "in retrospect, from the Midwest, (I absorbed) the culture of you show respect by spending time with people, never hurrying away from a **phone call**. I carry with me smiling at strangers, helping people if they need help. That probably helped in the Northeast."

But Werts says she is grateful to be a licensed home remodeling contractor in New Jersey.

"In New Hampshire, I probably wouldn't make a living," she says. "In Wyoming, they'd laugh at the idea of having a handywoman."

Finally, when Werts was 12, the family settled in Princeton, where Werts' father worked for the Educational Testing Service.

"You get uprooted, you get accustomed to being flexible," she says. "Flexibility is the key to handling the unknown" — things such as carpenter ants, termites, water damage or any number of situations that might creep up during the home-remodeling process.

"You can't be rigid."

And for Werts, there's nothing better than encountering the unknown, solving that mystery and observing the outcome.

"There's a level of satisfaction knowing you've actually fixed something," she says. "It's done. And it's not like — what if you were a psychologist and someone came to talk out their problems, and they left, and you wondered if they would ever be able to put their marriage together?"

"It's very concrete," Werts continues. "For sure that door will close and latch now. There's just a certainty."

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