

Rural Sask. lives getting redesign

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Rural women are learning to re-invent themselves -- and rural homes -- with the help of a Saskatoon-based interior redesigner.

Arlene Olson was in Regina recently teaching a five-day course to rural women interested in learning the art of interior redesign -- farmers' wives who hope to use these skills to generate off-farm employment.

"There are a lot of creative people in the rural area," Olson said in a recent interview.

"You can't make it on one income anymore," a group of six women (Olson, two course graduates and three new students) echoed as they gathered around a table in a hotel training room.

"In Saskatchewan, we have to learn how to diversify," Olson said matter-of-factly.

"This is my fourth career," one of the women pointed out.

"My husband is relieved to have some of the responsibility off his shoulders," interjected another.

"Rural women need to go out there and create their own jobs," De-Anna Horn of Grenfell, a recent graduate of Olson's interior redesign course, said. "You have got to be creative. You have to bring something new to the community."

Olson's five-day course costs \$1,900.

"It's worth every penny," Rita Csada of Gravelbourg insisted. Her business partner, Deb Nichol, was quick to agree.

Class size -- a maximum of four students -- appealed to Csada and Nichol, and their classmate Marybeth Wilkinson of Tisdale.

"You don't get lost in the woodwork," Nichol said.

"It's so much more worth it than just reading it in a book," Wilkinson said.

When Wilkinson, who's currently a nurse's aide in a nursing home, decided to pursue her lifelong passion for interior design, her options were limited.

"I knew I didn't have the money or four years to get my degree in interior design," she said.



CREDIT: Don Healy, Leader-Post
Arlene Olson (left), an instructor with The Art of Interior Re-Design, looks at swatches with student Marybeth Wilkinson of Tisdale.

So she registered for Olson's course, and applied for funding through the Canadian Agricultural Skills Service (CASS), a renewal program that offers financial support to farm families for education and training activities. It's a joint initiative of Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Csada and Nicol have also applied for CASS funding. So have Olson's former students, Horn and Katherine Thurmeier of Regina Beach, who joined Csada, Nichol and Wilkinson in the training room on the final day of Olson's course.

Rather than competing with one another, Olson encourages the redesigners she trains to work together and support each other.

"That's the Prairie mentality," she insisted.

"Everybody brings something different to the table. Everyone has a different eye," Thurmeier said.

Thurmeier took Olson's course last November, and has started her own home-based interior redesign business, called Abracadabra Redesign. Horn completed the course in January and now operates Elegant Re-Design.

To get the word out, Olson encourages her students to do several freebies. It's a strategy that's worked successfully for Horn.

"I did a freebie in town and got two jobs in Pilot Butte," she said. "I'm already busy ... I just jumped in with both feet. It's something that I really love," Horn said, bubbling with enthusiasm for her new business.

Promoting her redesign business has involved a lot of footwork, Horn said.

Potential clients are spread out over a large area, so mileage and travel time need to be factored into pricing. But cash-strapped rural residents aren't prepared to spend big bucks on non-essential services, such as making over their living space. So that too needs to be reflected in pricing, the women pointed out.

"The money is just not there," Horn said matter-of-factly.

Because each job is different, a one-price-fits-all approach just doesn't work, Horn said. So pricing varies. Horn charges \$200 and up per room, she said.

Even though there are fewer people in rural areas than in urban centres, Horn suggested rural woman may actually have an advantage, because they tend to know so many of the people in their community. Horn, for example, who used to own a coffee shop and bakery, met all sorts of people there who might someday benefit from her interior redesign service.

Rural-based interior redesigners have fewer resources available to them than their urban counterparts, Olson pointed out.

"They don't have access to the stores, so they can run out and buy things all the time," she said. There's no HomeSense nearby to zip into to pick up accessories to spruce up a home's decor, for example.

"You have to be creative," Horn said.

Interior redesigners offer homeowners a fresh eye.

"Sometimes people are not comfortable in a space, but don't know why. We help them identify what they need," she explained.

Working with items the homeowners already have -- adding and subtracting as needed -- redesigners transform a room.

"The wife is always eager. But at the end, the husband is even more excited," Olson said.

"Because it didn't cost him a lot of money," Nicol added. "The men are skeptical. But when they find out it doesn't take them any work and very little money, they appreciate it ... It's more affordable."

There's definitely a need for this type of service, the women agreed.

"I think it's a brilliant concept," Thurmeier said.

"A lot of rural women can't get out a lot, so they want their home to be a sanctuary," Wilkinson said.

"And men want to come home to a calm, relaxed atmosphere," Nicol said.

"People don't just want pretty; it also has to be functional," Horn said. "That's one of the challenges."

Like any new business, Olson's students said they realize it'll take time for their new businesses to generate a reasonable income.

"We're planning to do it on the side and grow into it," Csada, who currently works as a dental assistant, said.

The rewards of pursuing their passion in interior design aren't strictly monetary, the women agreed.

"It just makes a person feel good inside if they are able to help someone else," Olson said.

"People don't just want to have nice homes in the city," Thurmeier pointed out. "Rural people want them too."

For more information on Olson's training courses, call 1-800-956-3690.

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