

Crossword Business

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ESSEX -- Irene Wrenner's name pops up at a lot of weddings.

Wrenner knows the groom's favorite ice cream flavor and the bride's favorite song. She probably knows where the couple became engaged and what each does for a living. In some cases, she was a part of the proposal. The knowledge carries over to anniversary parties, birthday celebrations and bar mitzvahs.

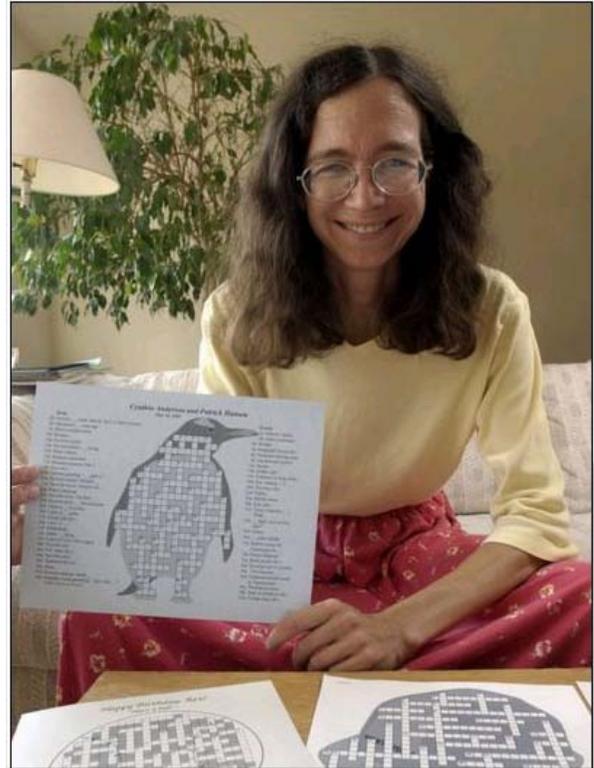
In nearly every case, the Essex resident has never met the individuals involved.

"It's part of the weird stuff that happens, with getting to know someone without knowing them," said Wrenner, owner of Personal Puzzles, a custom crossword-puzzle business that has provided personalized pieces for more than 350 events in the United States and Canada.

Since 1993, Wrenner, 41, has collected random facts about customers to create biographies of sorts. By filling in the letters across and down, customers and friends can get to know the people they have gathered to celebrate, she said. It often serves as an ice breaker at wedding receptions, during those first moments when the tables are filled with strangers becoming awkwardly acquainted.

"It becomes a great favor because people have to mingle. It really keeps people pretty busy," Wrenner said. "People get to know the bride and groom. They might know the groom's name, but they don't know his cat's name, for instance. They leave the wedding feeling like they know more."

The business, initially called Newsfavors, has become a full-time occupation for the long-time language fan.



"My mom was an English teacher, so I always loved words," said Wrenner, who was a computer technician and desktop publisher in New Jersey until moving to Vermont with her husband, Kevin, nearly eight years ago.

Wrenner used computer software to create customized newsletters for events, most of which included a crossword puzzle, but focused her energy on the puzzles when customers began to approach her for their own.

"It really broke out as its own entity," she said, and the variety of events featuring Personal Puzzle pieces began to grow.

Wrenner advertised in magazines for years – she spent about \$11,000 one year for advertising, materials and shipping -- and created a website during the early days of the Internet that helped immensely, she said. She has created puzzles for customers across the United States -- the farthest is Hawaii -- and Canada.

Rich Polt said he found Wrenner's Web site in December 2003, about 10 days before he was set to propose to then-girlfriend Jennifer Oken.

Polt and Oken are avid crossword fans, the Waltham, Mass., resident said, so he asked Wrenner to create a puzzle resembling the Sunday crossword puzzle in The New York Times.

"The name of the puzzle was 'A Great Institution,' and I wanted the big answers to be 'a lifetime united' and 'good times and bad,'" Polt said. "The puzzle was built along this whole thing: the one three-letter answer. The clue was 'word of the day' and the answer was 'yes.'"

Oken came home from work Dec. 30, 2003, to find the puzzle waiting for her with a pen and a single rose. She filled out the puzzle not knowing that it was a proposal until trying to fill the final spaces.

"She already, through filling out the other answers, had the Y, and all of a sudden it hits her, she can't even write it in, and she turns around, dumbfounded. She was speechless, I was speechless, and that was it," Polt said. The couple were married in September.

Wrenner said she has supplied about 350 puzzles for events, but likes to describe the tally as "400 weddings and a funeral."

Yes, a funeral.

Michele Ann Begandy, a Chicago resident, contacted Wrenner to create a puzzle for her father, who was dying of cancer in late 2003. Begandy said she wanted to create a puzzle about Robert Begandy's life because he was a lifelong fan of crosswords. She thought friends and family would be able to work on the puzzle during a get-together that would follow her father's burial.

Begandy said she received the final puzzle in time to also show it to Robert.

"The look on my dad's face when I showed it to him, he couldn't get over the fact that someone was able to create a puzzle of his life," Begandy said. "And the people at his wake all got a copy of it, and there was a wipe-off board people used. It was a different way of telling a story about my dad's life."

Larger clients include Goya Foods, which used Wrenner's crosswords in its company-wide newsletters; and DreamWorks' Nashville record label. DreamWorks called her at the last minute for a puzzle that would be included in the album art for the 1999 Asleep at the Wheel album, "Ride With Bob." She made it, sent it and learned later that the album won a 2000 Grammy for Best Recording Package.

"I like to say it's my Grammy-winning puzzle," she said with a laugh, holding up the liner notes.

The research process, she said, fits into her inquisitive nature. A James Bond-themed puzzle prompted her to read some of the spy novels; an ongoing project about local jazz legend Big Joe Burrell, who died Feb. 1, has led to research on jazz.

"You just have to let the universe bring things to you," she said of the stream of subject material that crosses her path in the puzzle process. "It's fun to see what the universe sends."

And what she then brings to the grid.

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