

Publication: Jnl Final Edition 8/2005-today; Date: Aug 24, 2008; Section: Careers; Page: I2



Insect business growing wings

Social

1/3 Butterflies

1/3 sells

1/3 creatures

1/3 for

1/3 celebrations

By Elizabeth Chang The

1/3 Washington

1/3 Post

When Linda Ciccolella Marchman was employed as an assistant principal in Florida, she never dreamed her job title would someday be “butterfly farmer.”

She and her husband, a former principal, moved to Alabama when he retired, then relocated to Charlottesville, Va., in 2000, where they bought more than three acres of property and built a house. It was shortly after the second move that Marchman read about butterfly farming in a magazine. “I’ve always loved butterflies,” says Marchman, 56. “I’m just a nature person.” She decided to try raising monarchs, whose caterpillars eat only milkweed. “I looked out into our fields, and it looked like I had a whole lot of milkweed here. I thought, I’m all set.”

The 20 or so caterpillars that Marchman ordered online, however, wouldn’t touch the stuff, which turned out to be the similar-looking dogbane. She found herself “walking up and down our country roads here, looking for milkweed to feed them.” (Since then, she’s found milkweed on her property, and also branched out to raising painted ladies and black swallowtails.)

As Marchman became more proficient and started taking orders for butterflies to be released at weddings or other celebrations, her business, Social Butterflies, slowly grew. She raises the insects in cages in her yard from April to October. When the butterflies, for which she charges about \$95 a dozen, emerge, they are packed in glassine envelopes and put in a Styrofoam cooler with a frozen cold pack, which keeps them dormant, and shipped overnight to the host of the event. About an hour before the release, the insects are allowed to warm up. A member of the wedding party whom Marchman refers to as a “butterfly attendant” distributes the insects to guests, who open the envelopes and release them. (Sometimes the butterflies are put in a flower-decorated “release cage” the top of which is lifted to let them go in a more dramatic fashion.)

“It was the most fabulous thing we could have done,” says Viki Clark, of McLean, Va., whose daughter’s Charlottesville wedding ceremony featured butterflies. The release went well, and the butterflies “just hung around,” one resting in a bouquet, another on the maid of honor’s dress. “Everyone was just so happy with it.”

Last year, Marchman received 50 or 60 orders and made about \$4,000 in profit on sales of \$13,000 to

\$14,000. In January, she quit a parttime job to devote herself to the butterflies full time. She spends much of each day feeding caterpillars, shipping butterflies, communicating with customers, maintaining her Web site and doing bookkeeping. She also is the director of a butterfly association, which gives classes to wedding planners.

The business brings her a lot of satisfaction. A hospice that orders 200 monarchs every year for a survivors' ceremony now has monarchs fluttering around all summer, Marchman says. "That's the type of story I love to hear."

In addition, butterflies are more environmentally friendly than the rice or balloons often used in weddings, she says, and are important pollinators, especially considering the disturbing collapse of bee colonies in the United States.