

Media cover-up



San Diego-based Custom Cool Covers (www.customcoolcovers.com) was launched in 2008 by Costco members Tammy Green and her husband, Al Maroni, after struggling to keep their outdoor TV protected from the elements (dust, birds, moisture, more birds). "There were other cover companies out there, but none making outdoor TV covers that actually protected and looked great too," says Tammy.—T. Foster Jones

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IF YOU HAVE A NOTE, photo or story to share about Costco or Costco members, email it to connection@costco.com with "The Member Connection" in the subject line or send it to "The Member Connection," The Costco Connection, P.O. Box 34088, Seattle, WA 98124-1088. Submissions cannot be acknowledged or returned.



Going out on a limb

Katie Kiyo

WHEN KATIE KIYO was laid off from her advertising job at the height of Michigan's worst economic crisis, she saw the opportunity to put a successful 25-year advertising career behind her and embrace a new way of life—one of entrepreneurship.

The Bloomfield, Michigan, Costco member went on to develop an online sympathy/remembrance gift company (www.bighugllc.com) offering unique personalized gifts to honor special people with whom one shared life's journey.

"I named the company Big Hug because, to me, those two little words conveyed an expression of caring and compassion," says Kiyo.

The Big Hug brand was eventually extended to include other celebrations, with many of its products purchased by schools, businesses and employers to honor an individual, commemorate an event or celebrate a milestone.

"Two of our most cherished gifts are our personalized wind chimes and Tree Huggers," says Kiyo. Tree Huggers are custom-engraved stainless steel tree dedication plaques, mounted with tension springs so they can expand as the trees grow. They can accommodate up to four lines of personalized text plus an icon.

"Tree Huggers have been purchased singly and in larger quantities by individuals and families, for use in parks, golf courses, Tree Cities (www.arboday.org), botanical gardens, etc., to honor, commemorate and celebrate something or someone," Kiyo says, adding that they are also often used by philanthropic organizations, schools and churches for fund-raising.

Says Kiyo, "It was a particularly great honor when Tree Huggers were placed on the newly planted trees in the 9/11 memorial park at Ground Zero in NYC."—TFJ

Better gnomes and gardens

NOT ALL ELVES live in trees, baking cookies, and not all gnomes are filled with wanderlust, having their pictures taken all over the world. So, where's a non-roaming gnome to find a home?

Costco members and avid gardeners Val and Nancy Jackson have the answer. Their company, Whimsical Woods (www.whimsicalwoods.net), has created a nifty niche business handcrafting all-natural birdhouses, bird feeders and gnome homes, made from downed trees and other natural materials gathered from their 14 acres on Washington's Olympic Peninsula.

"Years ago, I made log bird houses for several fund-raisers at our old church near Santa Cruz, California," says Val, an electronics engineer by day, who is a self-described life-long "wood shop kind of guy." "Everyone

seemed to enjoy the uniqueness of them. That led to 'toad homes,' 'fairy houses' and finally 'gnome homes'.

"Our gnome homes are made from all-natural materials," he continues. "They are decorated with driftwood from the western Washington coast, moss and pine cones from our woods and eastern Washington, and dried flowers from our garden."

Gnome homes (available in a variety of sizes of custom, one-of-a-kind designs, depending on the size of your particular gnome) are, appropriately, a whimsical focal point for garden landscaping.

"We'd rather reuse items found in nature and recycle them," says Nancy. "It gives the homes a lot more character. It makes them more whimsical."—TFJ



VAL JACKSON