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The goddess within

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Beverly Danusis is a goddess. She is also the creator of a new line of dolls designed to help pre-teen girls build self-esteem and positive body images and find the goddesses within themselves.

The SophiaDolls, nine years in the making, will be introduced to the world March 8 when Danusis, a Fort Wayne resident, makes a special hourlong appearance on shopping channel QVC. But northeast Indiana women will have a chance to order the first edition of the dolls, to be delivered in time for Christmas, at Woman's Night Out on Sept. 20 at Headwaters Park in Fort Wayne.

The goddess line includes seven dolls, in varying shapes, sizes and costumes, named after seven Greek goddesses and the personality archetypes they represent. Unlike Barbie or the Bratz dolls, the SophiaDolls are realistically proportioned to represent real women's body shapes, ranging from a size 6 to a size 16.

"The message is, whatever hand nature has dealt you, you are perfect as you are," Danusis said.

SophiaDolls is a division of Nea Matia — Greek for "new eyes" or "new sight" — a company Danusis formed with marketing expert Diane Estrada. With the exception of Danusis' husband, George Danusis, the company is staffed and run entirely by women.

Danusis understands better than most the power of the idealized images of beauty that women see around them and feel they also must achieve. She spent 20 years in the cosmetics business in Los Angeles, rising "from sales girl to running the company."

"This is my repentance," she said.

After a friend committed suicide because "she couldn't be the perfect woman," and her own daughter repeatedly landed in the hospital as she tried to starve herself thin enough to be a model, Danusis began to re-evaluate her life and her priorities.

"After 20 years, I really was beaten up," she recalled. "I thought, 'What am I doing?' All I'm doing is plastic."



Prior to creating her SophiaDolls, Beverly Danusis worked in the cosmetics industry. (Photo by Greg Bastin)

The solution, Danusis decided, was to quit her job.

"I'm the quarterback, at the height of my career. I'm at the Super Bowl. I've got the ball, and I'm leaving," she reasoned.

Danusis, then a single parent, took two years off. Eventually, she ended up in Monterey, Calif., where she led expensive empowerment workshops for corporate women. But she soon learned that even these very successful women suffered from deep self-doubts based on their inability to live up to unrealistic body and beauty images.

"It's because of how we have set up in the world, glamorized by Hollywood and the doll industry, these ideals of beauty ... We always feel lesser than," she said.

As she pondered how to address these self-defeating attitudes, which women begin forming at a very young age, Danusis had an epiphany.

"I saw seven dolls, in seven different shapes, seven different sizes," she said.

She decided to name the dolls after Greek goddesses — in part, a tribute to the Greek heritage of her husband. Each goddess would represent a different personality archetype, as theorized by her inspiration, author and psychiatrist Jean Bolan.

Getting the dolls into production has presented a challenge, however. Molds were developed to make the dolls in the United States, but had to be redone to fit Chinese machinery when Danusis could find no one in the U.S. to make the dolls.

Finding a manufacturer they could trust to handle the task wasn't easy. "We've had to be so careful," she said.

And despite the commitment that the Small Business Administration claims to have made to help woman entrepreneurs, Danusis could find no funding there or elsewhere.

"They wanted me to prove my concept. I said, 'Once I prove my concept, I won't need you.'"

Danusis and her husband finally decided to finance the venture themselves.

The dolls, which will sell for \$99 apiece, are designed for "tweens," girls aged 9 through 12. Each comes with a booklet telling the story of how that goddess discovered her talents and developed her powers. Parent guides and workbooks encourage discussions about self-esteem and other issues between parent and child.

"I've got to get to the mother and daughter simultaneously. If I sell dolls just for the children, it's not going to change," Danusis said.

QVC, which discovered Danusis through one of the agents it uses, also insisted the package include a "Which goddess style are you?" quiz so each buyer can find the goddess who lives within her.

Danusis will appear first on a special entrepreneurs day show in March. If sales of the dolls meet QVC's goals, she will be awarded a two-year contract and make regular sales appearances.

Danusis has been working out of her southwest Fort Wayne home, but will move soon to offices nearby. In early 2008, the offices of the doll business will relocate to a historic downtown building being acquired by her husband.

Because of the difficulties involved in making the dolls in China, George Danusis eventually would like to find a way to manufacture them in Fort Wayne.

"That's his dream," Danusis said.