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Life is like a quilt. You take bits and pieces of often seemingly unrelated components, and once they're configured together, it becomes a whole.

Linda Thompson, the former Citrus County Builders Association executive director and longtime software support person in the computer industry, is currently drawing on those pieces of her life as she ventures into a new vocation. Thompson, 54, is working on launching her own online quilt shop, Piney Patch Quiltworks (www.pineypatch.com), based in her Citrus Springs home.

"Quilting as an art form has experienced a rebirth, and it's probably more popular now than it's ever been before," she said. Born in Indiana, Thompson grew up most of her life in Fort Lauderdale where her mother taught quilting for more than 25 years. "I didn't start quilting until 2001, just as a pastime, and that was after my kids were grown," she said. "When the kids were growing up I was too busy doing things."

After earning a degree in business from Nova Southeastern University she worked as an accounting clerk, typing, filing and answering phones. "I worked my way through that company," she said, until she advanced to the position she had prior to leaving, a liaison between computer users and the company's technical people. That's also where she met her husband, Kerry, a computer engineer. He currently works from their home.

Then in 2001, she had had enough of computers and left the company to do something else. "I took a year off, not really doing anything," she said.

She had been creative all along, she said, painting on glass, macramé, crocheting, decoupage. "Whatever was hot at the time I'd play around with," she said. After she left her job at Gould Computer Systems, her mother asked her to take a quilting class. "She told me, 'If you try it and don't like it, I promise I won't ask you again.' That was it," she said. "I tried it and was hooked." She worked a little while in a quilt shop in Fort Lauderdale, taught quilting classes and pursued it as a hobby.

Then in 2004 she and her husband moved to Citrus Springs. "When we first came here, I didn't know what I wanted to do," she said, "but I did know I wanted to find a quilting guild. I looked for that even before I looked for a job."

She joined Cracker Quilters and then started working for the Historical Society in the Old Courthouse. Her builder, Chuck Sanders, called to tell her the CCBA executive officer position was open and, even though she didn't know anything about the building industry, she applied for the job and was hired. She was there for two and a half years. "Being a newcomer to Citrus County was an advantage for me," she said, "and it was my organizational and my computer skills that got me the job."

She left in 2007 to pursue her online business.

Piney Patch 101

"I was having lunch with some friends - they were quilting friends - and of the four of us I was the only working person," she said. "One spoke up and said, 'You ought to open a quilt store.' We laughed it off, but the seed was planted." That was six months before she launched her business on New Year's Day. "I started thinking about the possibility of a brick and mortar store, and that scared the bejeebies out of me," she said. "There's a lot of cost involved in startup, which is why I'm doing a Web site as opposed to a brick and mortar store. I could easily have \$25,000 in fabric alone to open a shop, plus rent, overhead and payroll.

"My ultimate dream is to have a brick and mortar quilt shop, but this way I can figure out if I can make a go of it without putting our retirement (money) on the line," she said. As an online quilt shop, Thompson sells fabric, quilting supplies, patterns and kits. "We're also going to do handmade gift items," she said. "We" being Thompson and her mother, Jeanine Gonzalez, who also moved to Citrus Springs.

"My mother is a very talented artist and she's been a tremendous help," she said. "She's had her own businesses; she helps me select fabrics, and she has a lot of her own original designs that I'm encouraging her to copyright." For Gonzalez, this is her third "career," having worked as a graphic artist for about 10 years for the Boca News and then more than five years teaching quilting and how to use Bernina sewing machines. "Quilting is a wonderful way to express your creativity," Gonzalez said. "Quilts really are pieces of art. I think quilting has mistakenly been called a craft; it's really an art form." She said today's quilters depend on online shops, especially those who live in areas where brick and mortar shops are not readily available, but also that the two can be compatible. "I'll be doing some samples for the Web site and designing some original patterns," she said. "Mainly I'm in the background as a sounding board for (Thompson)."

Thompson said that in her research, she found between 150 and 200 online quilt shops. Her challenge is to make hers distinctive and a site quilters will want to visit - and tell their quilting friends about. That's where her computer knowledge comes in. "The site is key," she said. "If you like my site, you're going to bookmark me as a favorite or you might even get on my newsletter, and that's how I build my customer base. This is why this is such a good melding of my skills - Web site knowledge and quilting. I feel like I might have a step up on other online shops out there, because I've done Web work and I'm going to make it look like the sites I enjoy visiting myself.

"So, you're not going to come to my Web site and find 400 things on the home page and flashing things and things jumping around," she said. She said in addition to the online store, which she hopes will keep her busy full time, she also wants to join some other local quilting guilds and teach some classes. As for finding time to quilt, she said she hopes she'll have time. "Every quilt shop owner I've talked with has said that if you think you're doing this so you'll have more time to quilt, it's not going to happen," she said. "But, and this might sound strange, there's satisfaction just in coming in here (her quilting studio) and just being with the fabric, looking at it and dealing with it.

"Being on the Internet, I'll be selling all over the world, hopefully," she said. "And I'm trying to pick things (to sell) that you don't find everywhere. I'm going to deal in the things not as easily

accessible to folks like us who live in the sticks." She pointed out her studio window at the Florida pines and said, "Piney Patch."