

Fletcher-based outdoor gear manufacturer awarded **2019 Business North Carolina's Small Business of the Year**.

Excelsior Sewing LLC / LightHeart Gear is this year's recipient of the **Business North Carolina's Small Business of the Year** award. Excelsior Sewing LLC is a Woman Veteran owned Contract Sewing operation specializing in products for the Outdoor Industry. They also manufacture and market their own line of ultra-lightweight tents, ultra-lightweight raingear, and hiking apparel for women under the LightHeart Gear name brand. The CEO and designer, Judy Gross, started the company in her basement and in April of this year, celebrated the company's 10th Anniversary. During a luncheon and awards ceremony, Business North Carolina honored the 2019 Small Business of the Year winner and three runners-up. The event was held December 9th at The Carolina Inn in Chapel Hill, NC.

Judy recalls "In June, 2006, I was hiking the Appalachian Trail. I was carrying a 4-1/2lb. tent. I met a guy with a tent, a lot lighter than mine, and it was huge – like a palace." Judy had been sewing all her life, and attended design school at Houston Community College, after a long career in nursing. With a strong knowledge of pattern making, she set about designing her own tent. The result was a tent under 1.7lbs and in the process, a novel structural support system utilizing hiking poles rather than standard tent poles was developed and patented. "My husband's favorite motto is 'invest in what you know.' I know sewing, I know hiking and backpacking, so I put the two together" she says about starting her company.

Last year, the company undertook a project to construct a new factory and relocated the operation, in December 2018, to Fletcher, NC in Henderson County. This tripled the size of the production area; overcoming physical constraints for additional sewing and other machinery and allowing the company to grow and increase production capacity. In the last six months the number of employees has increased from 6 to 10. This is a family business with Judy's husband, Marc Penansky, CFO and son, Joshua Gross, Operations Foreman, as part of the workforce.

"This award is a great honor for our company," said Russ Robinette, COO. "It is a tribute to the hard work of our employees and their dedication to quality workmanship. We also wish to thank the Henderson County Partnership for Economic Development for their nomination and support." Judy added, "I am so proud of what our small team has been able to achieve" and "I look forward to the future growth."

For more information or questions, please contact Russ Robinette at russ@excelsiorsewing.com or 828-398-8056.

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