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Reluctant honor looms for folk art shop



A grouping of holiday chalkware at Vaillancourt Folk Art. (T&G Staff File Photo/MARK C. IDE)

By Donna Boynton TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

SUTTON — In the billion-dollar industry that is Christmas, Vaillancourt Folk Art is a rarity.

And in Massachusetts, it is one of a kind.

To honor the success of the local small business and for its contributions to cultural tourism in the state, Rep. Jennifer M. Callahan, D-Sutton, has sponsored a bill that would make Vaillancourt Folk Art the official Christmas ornament and collectibles maker of Massachusetts.

"To be honest with you, it's kind of embarrassing," said Gary Vaillancourt, who with his wife, Judi, started Vaillancourt Folk Art in 1984. "I feel kind of awkward with all this economic turmoil to have something like this before the state Legislature."

However, Ms. Callahan said she is proud to recognize the entrepreneurial spirit of a family that has built a small company of international renown that happens to make its home in Massachusetts, in her district.

"Vaillancourt Folk Art is a family business that has been capable of mass producing collectibles being done by a handful of educated, trained artists," said Ms. Callahan. "And this particular business is done with the notion that these pieces of handmade art will be passed down as a family tradition."

Vaillancourt Folk Art is one of the few remaining small Christmas ornament and collectible manufacturers in the

country, and the only one in Massachusetts, a state once heralded for its manufacturing.

In 1989, there were more than 100 collectible artisans across the country.

In the early 1990s, individual artists started to license their pieces to the larger Christmas ornament companies, such as Dept. 56, and the number of smaller companies started to decline.

Today, there are only two others similar to Vaillancourt, Buyers Choice in Pennsylvania and Lynn Haney Collection in Texas.

"If you look at us, we are a niche; we are a Christmas niche," Mr. Vaillancourt said. "And there are a few of us remaining.

"If you look at the huge industry, it's a struggle to compete with the Chinese marketplace. We can't do it with price, but we do it with quality," he said.

"We are certainly one of the higher-end marketplaces, and that separates us from the Chinese," he said.

Ms. Callahan said the bill being reviewed will have to advance through the legislative process for a vote.

"In this economy it is important to keep this tradition alive, and keep a small business humming," said Ms. Callahan.

"It is the uniqueness of Vaillancourt Folk Art that speaks to why it should be the official Christmas ornament and collectibles maker.

"This is a good economic action, and is helpful to the commonwealth in advancing cultural tourism," she said.

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