

# IQ



## **ECONOMY**

***Shining Reputation***—Why our stainless steel manufacturers are the world's best. **Pg. 14**

## **COMMUNITY**

***Serving Solutions***—VISTA members fight poverty across the region. **Pg. 18**

## **PHILANTHROPY**

***Lasting Goodwill***—How a World War II Army secretary built a legacy for her town. **Pg. 36**

## ***STEM Seekers***

New cutting-edge labs at St. Cloud State promise to turn Central Minnesota into a tech and science hub.

**Pg. 22**

# LakeLady Custom Rods

Breezy Point, Minn.

By Maria Surma Manka

Photography by John Linn

*Fifty years ago in Kansas, Kris Kristufek stepped on and broke his grandmother's prized bamboo fly fishing rod. She demanded that he make her a new one, which he did using a willow branch, a string and a hook. Little did he know that after a successful run in the oil industry, that event would eventually lead to a second career building custom rods in the woods of northern Minnesota.*

But that's exactly what happened when, restless in retirement, Kristufek visited the Brainerd library for information on custom rods. Although his first attempt was "terrible," Kristufek kept trying, even attending master rod-building classes around the world. He launched LakeLady Custom Rods in 1999, more as a hobby than a serious business venture. But the popularity of the beautifully crafted and technically accurate rods turned it into a year-round labor of love.

LakeLady Custom Rods are built according to the angler's hand and arm measurements and exact specifications. They are ergonomically correct and accurately fitted to the individual. The rod is then completed and decorated according to the customer's wishes. An Australian customer, who found LakeLady on the internet, requested a "Little Mermaid" rod as an anniversary gift for his wife—complete with Ariel on the rod's split-grip handle.

We got hooked on the idea of custom rods and caught up with Kristufek to learn more. **IQ**



**REEL SUCCESS:** Kris Kristufek lauched LakeLady Custom Rods as a hobby.

**Crucial Questions** Customers have to answer an extensive questionnaire to help Kristufek build a rod to their exact needs and specifications. Intended use, action and blank power, type of guide and reel—even grip materials can be customized.

**Worthy Wait** A rod is typically built in six to eight weeks, although that time can stretch into months for intricate rods and designs. An angler may have to wait up to a year for a bamboo rod, which requires an extraordinary amount of time for stripping, varnishing and air drying.

**It's Official** In 2001, LakeLady Custom Rods was named the official Minnesota Governor's Fishing Opener rod crafter for Gov. Jesse Ventura and his party.

**Supply and Demand** Most of the 100 to 150 rods that Kristufek builds each year are for freshwater fishing, including spinning rods, pike rods, bobber rods, muskie rods and some fly rods. The majority of customers come from Minnesota and surrounding states.

**Twisted Technique** Kristufek uses a technique called spiral wrapping, which typically cannot be found on mass-produced rods. The line guides are wrapped around the rod from the zero to the 180 axis, turning a casting rod into a spinning rod. This keeps the rod stable and improves casting distance and accuracy.



**Delicate Designs** Feather inlays are a common design request, as is colorful thread weaving and paint jobs that match the angler's boat. One angler gave Kristufek three diamonds to embed in her rod.



**Buy Local** The graphite and carbon fiber materials, as well as most of the blanks, are sourced from St. Croix Rods in Wisconsin. The only material not produced in the United States is the cork for the handles, which comes from a factory in Portugal—the country that produces 90 percent of the world's cork.

**Discarded Beauty** Kristufek buys and scavenges for burl wood, which is diseased or knotted hardwood. Usually too knotty for furniture, small pieces of burl wood can be “beyond beautiful” in a fishing rod.

**Customized Care** When Kristufek met a passionate muskie fisherman who had lost his entire left arm and part of his right hand in the Iraq War, he devised a one-of-a-kind rod that the angler could hold and reel in with his prosthetic hand.