

# Mary Hughes



**M**ary Hughes is her actual name, but Marinites probably best know this '80s icon as Futon Mary. She is as much a part of Marin lore as are macramé classes, fern bars, bookcases made out of bricks and Galliano bottles, lava lamps, water beds, hot tubs and the music of Van Morrison wafting mournfully through the patchouli-soaked hills of Fairfax.

"I started in 1980," says Hughes inside her Santa Venetia home stuffed with what might be the world's most diverse collection of *Coca-Cola* memorabilia. "I worked for a woman in a loft in a Sausalito shipyard, and we had this ladder so steep that, to this day, from all that practice, I can walk down a ladder forwards carrying a bale of cotton. It's an acquired skill!

"I worked hard and handmade all the futons, tearing the cloth, sewing up the sack, and turning the cotton futon inside out through this very tricky maneuver. Then I sewed it shut with a five-foot seam and tufted with a 12-inch needle. *Voilà*—a futon—and a stab in the thigh from the 12-inch needle."

To the uninitiated, a futon is a Japanese bed that came to America along with macrobiotic cooking. It signifies an all-natural lifestyle. Japanese homes were so compact that everyone would sleep in the same room, rolling up their futons during the day.

"Americans are bigger," says Futon Mary, "and have more living space, so American futons are thicker. Unfortunately, because of this, mildew would develop under the futon. So I can almost visualize how this happened—some guy throwing out his old futon, rolling a joint and thinking, 'Wow, man, if I put it on pallets, there won't be mildew.' That's how the first futon frame was made of two pallets."

Hughes says the early days were great fun, flying by the seat of her pants—futons were everywhere, all the rage. Gradually, they became



a bigger piece of the market, and then mainline furniture companies wanted them, seizing a big chunk of the once-alternative lifestyle market.

Hughes, now in her third decade of selling futons, says that what has helped her survive in a highly competitive marketplace is her ability to adapt to change.

“When the futon industry was young, so was I, and I had a chance to make a difference” says the blunt-spoken businesswoman. “For instance, there’s a little plastic lock on a futon frame now. That’s because one day I had to deliver a futon to Sausalito. There was no place to park and I had to navigate four flights of narrow stairs to bring a futon to a living room that had a floor-to-ceiling plate glass window. The people wanted the futon right in front of the window. I thought—what if someone leans back really hard and goes through the window? What if someone has a bad dream or good sex and lands on their head four flights down?”

“So I ran to my van and grabbed two pieces of wood and made a locking wedge on the futon frame. The improvement was refined within the industry with a wood wedge that would automatically lock the futon frame in place. Problem solved—no worries about lawsuits.”

As many a small business person can attest, working for yourself can be brutal.

“Some mornings,” says Hughes, “I would stand in the shower and cry, worrying about the chain stores with their half-off futon sales. It kills me how naive consumers can be. No matter how alluring the pitch, there is no free lunch—somebody somewhere somehow is paying for it, usually you, but it is so cleverly camouflaged, you just don’t see it.

“My business concept has always been to give you the same deal I gave the guy before you. That way, everyone gets the same ‘Best I can do.’ It is simple, it is fair, and it works. I believe people don’t want to be tricked, so I deal straight.”

In 1989, like many ambitious entrepreneurs who can’t resist expansion, Hughes branched out and opened a store in Oakdale, a small town past Manteca on the way to Yosemite. The appeal was retail space at twenty-five cents a square foot. She also opened a third store in Modesto for the same reason.

“But,” she admits, “this scathingly brilliant idea fizzled. What I was attempting was to open two new markets and leapfrog the competition, but I ran out of energy. I was trying to run three stores 100 miles apart. People were ripping me off, and the commute was killing me. So, in 1995, I shut down the other

stores and focused on San Rafael alone. I concentrated a lot of money in advertising and secured a warehouse here.”

Through hard work, constant visibility and clever advertising (like standing on her roof to attract customers in one TV ad), Futon Mary has become a Marin household term—the “Liza” or “Barbra” of cotton-stuffed bedding.

“The notoriety is cool,” she admits. “It’s fun to go somewhere and have people recognize me and buy me a drink. I’ve had so many good friends be so incred-

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ibly supportive, especially during the tough times like the ’90s during the recession. For me, it’s been music first, family always. The Mayflower Chorus did so much for me. I’ve always had this ‘family’ of friends. It’s about the music. I love to sing, and I was really inspired by them. We were under the leadership of Larry Vargo who passed away in 1991—we would all hang together at the Mayflower Pub in San Rafael, and we were a core group of people who genuinely loved each other. They have always been there for me, and still are today.”

Although she’s a proven survivor in a fringe market that has suffered blows from ruthless competitors and an always-daunting economy, Hughes is jaded about the current state of affairs.

“Some people in Marin,” she declares, “are so pretentious. It seems people everywhere are ruder and more demanding. It really makes retail tough. Also, the business legislation sucks. Worker’s Comp rates are off the charts. I hesitate to hire another employee.”

In addition to singing with the Mayflower Chorus, Hughes has also tried her hand at stand-up comedy. When some friends asked if she, too, would “come out” like Ellen DeGeneres, she replied: “Don’t need to. Do people see my ads and think I’m running this business with my husband? Hell no. The cool thing about Marin is that people let you be. I have always felt safe place being ‘out.’”