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TOP STORY

## Lures are a big business for bass-fishing Mesa woman

By Brent Ruffner, Tribune Contributor Jun 10, 2017



Brent Ruffner/Special to the Tribune

Ice started to form as Jennifer Duff bundled up at Lake Kawaguchi, near the base of Mount Fuji in Japan.

Frigid temperatures didn't stop the Mesa woman from casting her fishing line out into the water, despite uncertainty about whether the 50-foot-deep lake would bring success in her fairly new career of professional bass fishing.

On that particular mid-November day in 1988, she thought her effort might be a lost cause. It was cold and she had yet to figure out how to catch enough fish for a tournament win.

Japan Bass Tournament Association members recruited Duff after they saw her win \$500 in a four-hour evening competition at Saguaro Lake. She was the only woman invited to compete in the 1988 Japanese tournament, and she managed to catch only four small fish.

"I was just devastated," Duff said. "They are bringing me over. They are promoting me – on and on. And now I'm failing. But I ended up winning the tournament. The fishing was horrible for everybody. I thought it was just me not being able to figure things out."

That event put the Mesa High School and Mesa Community College alum on the professional angler map and Japanese officials took notice. They asked her to live in Japan for a year to promote bass fishing.

Then, she ended up advising distributors she knew who wanted to import American-branded fishing lures into their country. She helped set up business meetings between Japanese and American companies and built relationships between them.

"Those sponsors were interested in what I had to say about the market," Duff said. "I understood their market now and what was going on in America."

In 1990, she decided to use her business acumen to start Jef International, an import/export company. A year later, she helped produce the Rico, the first high-end Japanese lure in the U.S. market, and the Lobina Lures company was born.

Lobina, a division of Jef International, sells three lure designs: Rico, the smallest; Rio Rico, a medium-size lure; and Suave, the largest. The word "lobina" is Spanish for "black bass," a nod to her Southwest roots. The business sells about 10,000 lures per year.

"We are in the desert," Duff said, admitting that an international fishing-lure business in the desert "is kind of unheard of."

Duff has sunk her hooks in the community with more than just her 27-year-old lure business.

She is president of the Mesa Community College development board, a member of the Mesa Planning and Zoning Board and co-founder of Retail, Arts, Innovation and Livability.

RAIL advocates community involvement, responsible development of housing and job creation in and around downtown Mesa.

Next year, she said, she hopes to run for Mesa City Council for the District 4 seat currently held by incumbent Christopher Glover.

DUFF said living and working in downtown Mesa since 2009 spurred her interest in civic engagement.

"It stimulated my interest in building community – having a community voice and getting involved with non-profits," Duff said.

She listed increasing funds for public safety and early and higher education among her top priorities, if elected.

Duff said she sees potential in Mesa and wants community members to continue to have a voice about how their city evolves. She said she favors having mixed-use development where people can both live and work. She said the city should be careful about how the city continues to develop.

"Sometimes decisions are made by people who have ideas for development," Duff said. "But they aren't living and working in that community."

She said she'd like to see more local businesses, such as a neighborhood grocery store, open downtown and likes the planned mixed-use apartment complex and retail space near Country Club Drive and Main Street scheduled to break ground in January.

"I care deeply about the area," Duff said. "I want it to be a rich community. Many of the people here are close knit. We all know each other. But (we need) to broaden that and have more engagement."



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