

Carrying on a father's legacy: Mother, daughter craft exquisite jewelry

Written by Story and Photos by Babette Herrmann Post Editor
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For about three decades, Angeline Touchine stood along side her jeweler husband Ben, watching him mold silver and join precious stones together to create beautiful bracelets, rings, earrings, necklaces and more.

She would soon join in the business, helping him to polish and clean one-of-a-kind pieces, which give a contemporary feel to traditional Navajo jewelry.

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More than a decade ago, that apprenticeship soon lead to Touchine crafting her own pieces. And she would be completely on her own when Ben passed away in 2013.

"I was there everyday from 1970," she said.

However, breaking out on her own actually began when Ben's health started to decline, giving her the opportunity to work on refining her craft, shaping the signature pieces that he taught her to make.

"He always encouraged me," she said.

It wasn't easy finding her way after spending 47 years with her beloved partner. With her rich jewelry collection sprawled across the table atop black velvet, she addressed a heavy silver bracelet with a gold overlay. She pointed to a slight flaw on the inside of the bracelet, saying that she had "burnt" the piece.

"If you're not patient or you hurry it's going to ruin it," she said.

So, a slow, careful hand and persistence helps her to stay focused while sitting at the crafting table.

While she works with different color stones, from emerald valley turquoise to opal, when it comes to working with blue turquoise, she prefers the bright Sleeping Beauty-mined stone to craft her squash blossom-style pieces.

And she's not alone in her passion for designing jewelry. Her daughter Vangie assists Touchine and even makes boutique pieces of her own.

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"She's the one the does the shining, the cleaning," Touchine said. "She's the finisher-upper."

Vangie is honing her skills, perfecting the geometric shapes that are part of the Touchine signature style.

"I work four days out of the week, and on Thursday and Friday I help my mom," she said.

Together, both of them take on the challenge of multiple orders. Most pieces, especially the larger orders are hand-delivered directly to customers. This sometimes entails a road trip to Arizona, and in some cases to California, to drop off handmade treasures.

"I like to do that," she said. "They need to know their artist."

And just how does a jeweler continue to find inspiration?

For Angeline, who lives in Churchrock, it's about the challenge each piece presents to her along with continuing the tradition of her late husband.

"To me, I am amazing myself," she said. "But all along I have been sitting by the master, who kicked it into my brain. He always encouraged me."

While many artists of this caliber showcase their pieces to local traders, both mother and daughter frequent the Gallup flea mart on Saturday and get other business by word of mouth.

Touchine shunned the idea of building a website, worried that she may get bombarded with orders that she'll be unable to fill.

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Vangie, on the other hand, is looking to spread her wings and to try selling her pieces in Santa Fe.

Touchine said that if Gallup wants to help grow tourism they need to embrace local artisans and have booths set up in Courthouse Square, especially during the Nightly Indian Dance season.

"I wish they would think about the artists and have a place," she said.

But for now, she is flush with new and repeat business. While this may be the case, Touchine is not one to take any kind of shortcut, using only the finest gems and silver jewelry that's heavy enough to stand the test of time.

"You have to stand behind your pieces as quality and we have people coming back all the time," she said.

To contact Angeline and daughter Vangie, call (505) 905-0644 or (505) 879-6331.