All That Glitters... are Collectibles

By Lindsey V. Corey

Jane Wullbrandt's small town, sample lady skills have helped advance her career as a big time jewelry designer. Growing up in Hampton, Iowa, Jane's favorite job was at her dad's grocery store where she spent her Saturdays sharing sausage samples with customers. Today, the Atlanta-based designer still says the best thing about her much more creative career is meeting people.

"I love being a part of other people's lives," she says. "Jewelry is such a personal thing, and it's so gratifying that people find something meaningful in my designs. I'm such a people person that I love to hear about the milestones they're celebrating with my jewelry."

While studying jewelry design and honing her silversmith skills at the University of Kansas in the 1970s, Jane took an aptitude test that revealed her strong desire to work with people. Her adviser determined the results were cause for concern, since this young woman was training to sit at a bench all day and create in solitude. "But actually it turned out perfect for me," she says. "Doing trunk shows is like being the sample lady. I get great feedback from customers that I then work into my jewelry lines." Jane has been designing custom pieces for 30 years, much of that time being spent as a sales associate in jewelry stores in Dallas and Atlanta. While at the first Tiffany and Co. store in Texas, she was charged with selling the Angela Cummings collection.

"She really made jewelry with character that all mixed and matched and told stories. It had so much character that I actually missed it when I was on vacation. I couldn't wait to get back. That's how you get collectors – a woman buys a pendent but she can't just run around with holes in her ears – and I learned that from her collection."

A move to Atlanta landed Jane another retail job in jewelry, but this time she was given the opportunity to be the custom designer for a local chain of seven fine jewelry stores. "I got really efficient and fluent at counter sketching," Jane com-

ments. "I got to be really popular and even had lines of people at the counter waiting for me to dream up something else for them on the spot."

But she didn't only want to rearrange the stones other people provided. So one evening Jane rushed home and grabbed a sketchbook to see what she could create on her own. "Designs were just dripping out of my hand, and I thought 'this is my true passion. Shame on me to just waste it.' Sure, I could maybe make more money selling office supplies or staying behind the jewelry counter, but I knew I had to do this."

That was the night her designer line was born, Jane remembers. In addition to the custom pieces she created for customers, the storeowners allowed her to showcase her unique pieces in their space. "I was still selling and being exposed to customers wants and needs, so I would add things to my collection that the vendors weren't offering and that I saw a demand for," she says. "I wasn't just sitting in a room dreaming up designs without feedback. I thought it was important to be able to combine my natural ability with practical experience."

And it worked. Jane's collection she created in her off hours at a bench at home was one of the stores' best sellers, right alongside Rolex watches. However despite her stunning success, she was still leery of designing fulltime. "Eventually, the owners said they appreciated my loyalty. But they had to kick me out of my sales job to go and pursue designing full time, or we all might regret it someday. I'm very risk-averse so thank goodness they made the decision for me. That was a real turning point."

She now has nearly 200 different pendants, necklaces, earrings and bracelets in white and yellow 18-karat gold available for sale in 80 stores throughout the country, including the Polished Edge in downtown Liberty, Missouri. Jane Wullbrandt pieces start at $275 and can cost an average of $1,000 each.

The Polished Edge will feature even more of Jane's work in a special trunk show from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 1. "Our concept is that jewelry should be as unique as the person wearing it," says boutique co-owner and custom designer Kevin Weaver. "And Jane's pieces are very unique. They are big and bold and powerful yet at the same time, very delicate and feminine. We really love all the colored gems she uses. It's some very cool stuff."

According to Kevin, her smoky quartz designs resemble chocolate so much that they inspired the theme for this year's event. The Polished Edge is calling the trunk show 'Indulge'. Their hope is that customers will crave the combination of Jane's designs and the renowned Kansas City pastry chef, Christopher Elbow's Artisanal Chocolates, which will also be showcased and given as promotions to those who purchase jewelry.

Jane's signature look has always been "gem intense and architecturally inspired," she says. Much of her inspiration comes from latticework on garden gates, fences and around old porches. In her new Lattice Collection, gem bezel accents resemble rivets on crisscrossing gold strips. She has also been influenced by famed architect, Frank Lloyd Wright's, leaded

stained glass church windows and hurricane street lamps in San Francisco.

"I carry Post-it Notes everywhere I go for sketching on the spot. I can't just turn it off because it's not really what I do. It's who I am. I just can't help it. I can't even think about retirement. I'll probably do this for the rest of my life."

For more information, visit www.janewullbrandt.com or thepolisheedge.com.

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