



QUICK-CHANGE ARTIST

Impressed by the transformation of that house into this store? How about going from pig farmer to jewelry designer?



Left: Nobody mistook this house for a high-end jewelry shop back in 2000...
Above: ... but then Kas Mahfood dug in and turned it into this jewel.

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FIVE QUESTIONS WITH KAS MAHFOOD
OWNER, KAS A FINE JEWELRY

- 1 YOUR PATH INTO THE INDUSTRY SEEMS ALMOST ACCIDENTAL. WHY JEWELRY?** I was looking for something that I could do and be creative and make a living at on my farm. I'd been making stained glass, but I had some of it fall over at art shows and get broken. And I tried making baskets — by the time I'd made a few, I was a basket case.
- 2 WHAT'S YOUR MENTAL PROCESS WHEN YOU'RE SITTING DOWN TO DESIGN?** My lineage is French and German. The German guy on one shoulder is going, "You will make it sturdy, and you will make it strong, and you will make it perfect!" And the French guy on the other shoulder is going, "You will have fun and follow your imagination!"
- 3 WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE COLORED STONE?** That's probably the most common question I get, and I say, "Well, you know, it's kind of like children: I love them all, but I love one on one day more than another."
- 4 WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR WHEN YOU HIRE?** Enthusiasm — the joie de vivre, so to speak. And experience dealing with people. One of my employees was in food service for a long time. If you can make people happy in food service, you can make them happy in jewelry.
- 5 WHAT WOULD YOU TELL AN UP-AND-COMING DESIGNER WHO ASKED YOU FOR ADVICE?** Focus on what you want to do, because a creative person sees many possibilities and can easily get sidetracked. My father was a car dealer, and he told me early on that business is business. That played in my ear a number of times — I would have liked to give things to my friends, but I had to keep the business separate.

SURE, YOU CAN'T MAKE A SILK PURSE FROM A SOW'S EAR. But Kas Mahfood traded some pigs, ears and all, for a jewelry store — more or less. "It was 1975, during the back-to-the-land movement," she says of the fateful exchange. "I had been living this self-sustaining lifestyle in the southern Missouri Ozarks. This guy moved into the area; he was a silversmith from Arizona, and he wanted to get into the hog production business." He offered to barter: her pigs for his jewelry-making equipment, stones and lessons. Twenty-two years later, she's running a booming business, selling a product she loves — mostly her own designs — out of a couple of renovated Victorian homes in central Missouri. Who needs a silk purse?



5 Reasons THIS STORE'S SO COOL

1 THE HISTORY WELCOME BACK, VICTORIA
Mahfood spent her first few years creating American Indian-style silver jewelry to sell on the craft-fair circuit. But as she progressed, thanks to the help of a couple of friends — another silversmith, who'd graduated from the Art Institute of New York City, and a traditional bench jeweler who taught her the rudiments of casting and working with gold, as well as how to set stones — plus some GIA training, she outgrew her old stomping grounds. "I basically priced myself out of the art fairs," she says. So in 1984, she opened the first incarnation of her store, in a small Victorian cottage built in 1890 in the Old Munichburg district of Jefferson City. She restored it to its original glory, but eventually got too big for it, too, in spite of purchasing and remodeling an additional building next door to house her bench jewelers. "I

needed more space," she says. "Everyone was running into each other." When a young couple she knew invited her to look at a building they owned nearby in January 2000, she wasn't certain it met her standards. "It had a 1930s-style porch. It didn't look old enough," Mahfood says. (It should come as no surprise that Mahfood was responsible for getting the neighborhood onto the National Register of Historic Places.) But a peek within revealed that the porch had been attached later — inside were the Victorian stylings her brand was already associated with locally. "And it had a perfect layout for a store, because it's long and narrow," she says. It needed some work, but she was up for it. "I did

this extensive renovation in six months," she says. It was finished by July, and Mahfood didn't cut corners: "We had a lot of brass decorative parts on the doors, but they weren't all there. So we made molds and cast the parts so they matched on every door." When customers approach the store, they twist an old-fashioned brass doorbell and then walk into a parlor with maroon drapes and a fireplace.

2 THE MERCHANDISE LOVE TO LOVE HUES
Upon entering, patrons are hit with a rainbow blast. "Our primary line is color," Mahfood says. The bulk of the store's inventory is color fashion and pearls, with a smaller selection of bridal pieces and diamonds — which aren't in the main room. They carry one watch line and no giftware or other non-jewelry items. And Mahfood's own designs constitute about 75 percent of the stock. "One thing that makes me a little different is that a lot of jewelers are in the business for the business itself," she says. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but, she says, "I got into the business for the jewelry itself. It's what I've really dedicated myself to." One of her favorite creations of her own is her Unlimited line of pendants and earrings, targeted at color collectors, which lets them switch their gems in and out. "I did it so you could wear the pieces formally or casually, to make your special colored stones more useful," she says.

3 THE FEMININE TOUCH SISTERS DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES
In an industry where plenty of retail stores are dominated by guys in suits, Mahfood's salespeople stand out: They're all women. "The neat thing about my sales staff is that they all really love jewelry and wear jewelry," she

FUN FACTS

- » Mahfood served as general contractor and designer on her renovations. She says, "I love it when I start, I hate it when I'm in the middle, and I love it when I'm finished."
- » The store gave out hot pink T-shirts printed with its slogan for Christmas. "We told the women that if they wore them as nightshirts, their husbands wouldn't forget."

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says. And since they have that in common with their customers, well, maybe it gives them an edge. Kas A's ad campaigns encourage "self-gifting," and they pooh-pooh the notion that a woman should wait for a man to buy her jewelry. "I feel like people come to us for an emotional boost," Mahfood says. "We make an effort to make every woman feel more beautiful and more special and a little more stylish than her friends, because the pieces are not going to be what you'll find at the mall." She takes on a lot of custom designs, and she knows what her customers want, because it's what she wants, too: "I have my own collection, and it's not for sale. I've selected colored stones that are the largest and the best, and I've made them into jewelry for myself — because I'm a showcase, too." (They do cater to men, of course, but, Mahfood says, "Frankly, we just don't sell that much men's jewelry.")



» KAS A FINE JEWELRY » JEFFERSON CITY, MO
URL: www.kasadesigns.com
OWNER: Kas Mahfood
YEAR FOUNDED: 1975
OPENED FEATURED LOCATION: 2000
STORE AREA: 5,400 square feet.
INTERIOR BUILD-OUT COST: \$350,000
EMPLOYEES: 6
SLOGAN: "Life's Too Long for Ordinary Jewelry."

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» Left: When she bought the property, Mahfood said, "It had a 1930s-style porch. It didn't look old enough." But with her vision — and \$350,000 — it recaptured its Victorian charm.
» Above: "It had the perfect layout for a store, because it's long and narrow." The fireplace and period furnishings don't hurt either.
» Top: This showroom is flooded with natural light, showcasing Mahfood's wares.

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FUN FACT



» The store gives out 'Kas Kashi' featuring Mahfood's portrait for its reward program — \$1 for every \$20 customers spend.

COOL STORE 105

THE ECO-FRIENDLINESS GREEN HOUSE EFFECT
4. When she came down from the mountains, Mahfood didn't leave her Earth-loving sensibilities behind. One benefit of restoring her buildings is that she was able to implement environmentally friendly measures into the reconstruction. She was motivated by her convictions — "There is a moral reason, because I believe that waste is a problem in this country," she says — but of course, there are benefits that even an SUV-driving store owner can appreciate. She installed more energy-efficient windows and a high-efficiency hot-water heater, and says "lowering the 12-foot ceilings by 8 inches didn't hurt," as it allowed her to put in extra insulation. As a result, the absolute highest her monthly energy bill has been is \$250, and it's usually lower. "It was going to cost me a few thousand dollars to do it that way," she says, "but I knew it would save me a lot of money in the long term."

THE FUTURE COLOR SCHEMES
5. A self-described fourth-generation entrepreneur, Mahfood has already begun to source some of her manufacturing out to Thailand, to keep up with demand. ("For a few years, my business was doubling every year," she says. "It's not anymore; I wish it would.") And given her work's growing popularity, yes, she is actively exploring the possibility of expanding beyond retail into a full-blown wholesale design business, as well. "That's in the works for me. I did a trunk show in California in March, and I've got a trunk show scheduled at the end of September. I love travel, and that's a real good way for me to get out there," she says. — JOSH WIMMER

- » TOP LINES THEY CARRY**
1. KAS A DESIGNS
 2. BREUNING
 3. ZINA STERLING SILVER
 4. ALISA UNGER DESIGNS