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Kas Jacquot celebrates 40 years of jewelry-making

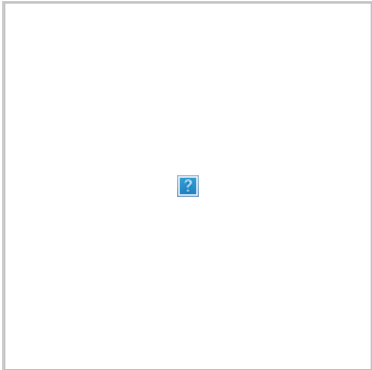
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Kas Jacquot, right, is pictured with her daughter Toni Michelle at Kas A Designs in the historic Old Munichburg area of Jefferson City. Photo by Leah Beane/News Tribune

The first jewelry Kas Jacquot ever made was a simple, silver turquoise ring for her then 15-year-old daughter, Toni Michelle. At that time, they were living on a farm in a remote part of the Ozark Mountains, where Jacquot, along with her first husband, raised pigs and goats.

"I melted three tries before the final ring," said Jacquot, who had traded a few hogs for some turquoise, jewelry-making equipment and lessons on silver-smithing.



"My daughter still has that ring, and we've definitely repaired it over the years."

An entrepreneur and artisan, Jacquot, 63, is celebrating a 40-year career as a gemologist and successful jewelry designer. Known for crafting many one-of-a-kind pieces of diamond and gemstone heirlooms, she turned Kas A Designs, the company she founded in 1984, into a high-profile business with staying power. A savvy marketer and veteran businesswoman, she's also adjusted to the changing trends in the jewelry industry and persevered.

"I always say I graduated from the University of Birch Tree, the school of hard knocks," said Jacquot, referring to living on the farm in the tiny town of Birch Tree, Missouri.

A single mother, who dropped out of Jefferson City High School in her junior year, she was drawn to a self-sustaining lifestyle, living off the land. She made goat cheese and gardened and was also crafty, doing stained glass and basket weaving.

Growing up, she recalls when she was around 4 years old taking apart a piece of her mother's costume jewelry, and often made dandelion jewelry in the backyard.

Making real jewelry was a lot harder, but that became her passion and she was a disciplined student. At the farm, she continued her education by doing, and also received her GED and earned



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her degree from the Gemological Institute of America (GIA).

After five years in the Ozarks, she returned to Mid-Missouri and worked as a freelance designer/jeweler out of a studio in her home in Russellville. For several years, she created and sold American Indian-style silver jewelry on the craft-fair circuit and traveled with Silver Dollar City artists in the Midwest and other parts of the country. She won second prize at an art fair in Memorial Park and later appeared in a News Tribune article, one of many that have been written about her over the years.

She was 32 years old when she opened Kas A Designs in a small Victorian cottage in the historic Old Munichburg section of Jefferson City. Being a female business owner required her to overcome many hurdles.

"I went to the most prestigious gem show in Tucson to get more experience as a gemologist, and at that time only 25 percent of gemologists were women," she said. "I was young and attractive, and men didn't really take me seriously."

Later, when she applied for a loan to expand her business, she found it difficult; but eventually someone believed in her as much as she believed in herself. In July 2000, she purchased and renovated two Victorian homes, circa 1870, that are now on the Register of Historic Places. The mix of antiques and old-world elegance along with her sparkly display cases full of gemstone and diamond jewelry makes it quite the showcase inside and out.

While she's always carried antique and estate jewelry, the bulk of her business came from custom-made jewelry with gemstones. While diamonds are more of a science, she said colored gemstones are an art and much more complicated to judge, needing more of a trained eye. She has traveled extensively for business and pleasure, going to a tiny Tahitian island to find loose pearls and to Sri Lanka and Brazil for other gemstones.

"I work directly with mine owners from all the world for the top-quality colored gemstones, and I have built up one the of the largest collections in the country."

She's also created two signature trademarked collections, including Joie De Vivre, influenced by the French architecture and art she photographed during her travels in the country. It includes pendants and other jewelry with mixed metals adorned with diamonds, pearls and colored gemstones.

Jacquot completes a hand-drawn jewelry sketch, which is turned into a 3-D drawing through computer software, then a wax mold is made that can be cast with metal, allowing them to reproduce the piece.

On her Synchronicity line, she worked with her daughter, who at one point worked full time at Kas A Designs. Michelle, who lives in New Bloomfield and raises Foxtrotter horses, also received her Accredited Jewelry Professional certification from the GIA. She currently assists in design and sales at Kas A Designs, where they've weathered a weaker economy and experienced changes in their customer base.

"We had double-digit growth for many years and a steady climb for the first 32 years of the business, but nine years ago that started to change," Jacquot said. "When the economy was tanking, I knew that people would always be falling in love and getting married."

While she already carried some engagement and wedding rings, she added a large bridal department that today accounts for 40 percent of her business. She also refashions pieces of jewelry.

"For many years, I didn't have hardly any male customers and most of my business was 90 percent female, but now it's more equal," she said.

"Normally the summer months are very slow, but this year it's been very busy," she said. "I've gone through many ups and downs, and sometimes it feels like Death Valley - and the holidays are generally insane - but this feels wonderful."

There have been many peaks and valleys in her personal life, too, but she's a survivor and keeps pushing forward. She's successfully utilized many provocative billboard campaigns and promotions like "Kas Kash," credit for customers in the form of bills featuring her as "The Jewel Queen" and wearing a tiara.

"My motto has always been: "failure cannot cope with persistence,"" said Jacquot, who saw those words on a sign at a booth at an art fair early in her career.

In a way, she's come full circle. She's planning to move her shop back to the original building where she started - contingent on whether she can sell her current store.

"I don't need all of this space, and I want to be able to be more hands-on with customers and return to the roots of my business," she said.

Other than her bridal lines, she's only going to carry her own designs. She'll import diamonds from

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an Israeli firm and continue her expertise in gemstones.

"Before, people were buying mostly diamond gifts, but now colored gems are coming back strong nationwide," she said. "That's my passion, and that's what the foundation of my business is built on."

Do you know a local businesswoman who is effective, energetic and passionate? News Tribune is compiling this year's "15 in '15," a list of women who deserve recognition for the work they do in Jefferson City, for the upcoming edition of #jcmo Inside Business. To nominate a local businesswoman for "15 in '15," send an email to rebecca@newstribune.com explaining why you think she deserves to be recognized.