

Master silversmith Tommy Lowe creates cluster jewelry

Written by Gallupsun Staff
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LUKACHUKAI, Ariz. – Tommy Lowe, 60, is Maji Deeshgiizhníí born for Táchii'nii. His maternal grandfathers are Tótsohníí and his paternal grandfathers are Naakaii Dine'ée. Raised northwest of Lukachukai, Ariz., he continues to live and work there today.

In April 1995, Lowe began a life of silversmithing after his position as production superintendent at the lumber mill in Navajo, N.M. ended.

“I started buying silversmithing tools when I got my income tax. I bought an acetylene bottle, brazing board, tweezers, scribes, pliers,” he recalled.

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During those early days, Lowe had to find a style for his jewelry creations, an effort that was hit-and-miss.

“You have to start from scratch. It’s probably like making fry bread: you need flour, baking powder, salt, grease and a good, fine-tuned stove,” he said.

His early designs were single stone pieces, beginning with a ring and bracelet. When it came time to sell, however, the buyers were not interested.

“There was a lot of this particular style. When I went into the curio shops, there were showcases filled with this type. The pawnshops had a lot, too,” he said.

Lowe thought about this and decided to change his style to cluster jewelry pieces, which quadrupled the amount of time necessary to create his art.

“Now there’s a difference between the needlepoint and the cluster,” he said. “The needlepoint is usually very skinny. The cluster style is tear drop and heavy pointed.”

He bought material for his style change, including Kingman turquoise, sterling silver, bezel, solder and other items.

“I cut up the silver, sliced them into pieces and I made my bezel pattern,” he said, noting that the initial cluster piece he made was a matching set of earrings and a ring.

His close relatives and friends expressed admiration for his new style and Lowe decided to go forward with his cluster jewelry. He bought more silver and other supplies to make a dozen more matching sets.

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"I went to the nearest Indian Market to sell and they loved it. People wanted to know where I was from," he said. "It's the people, they are my inspiration."

Success in the jewelry making business comes down to three things, Lowe believes: number one, quality, number two, authenticity, number three, stamping your work so people can identify the silversmith.

"That's how you promote yourself," he said.

The other unspoken sacrifices that go into his work materialized in the form of back problems, lack of sleep and 12-hour workdays in order to produce signature pieces and make his deadlines.

"If the customer complains about the price, I say look at me first. I sacrificed for you," he said.

In 2005, Lowe began selling his jewelry to Navajo Arts and Crafts Enterprise and the company took his unique style to next level by offering his jewelry at their stores across Navajo land.

He said when the tribal enterprise pays him, he adds to the Navajo economy by spending his money at NACE stores through his purchase of raw materials. "Remember, we're in this together," he said.

Lowe's jewelry pieces include rings, pins, squash blossoms, bracelets and crowns for Miss Navajo.

He continues to make jewelry near the foot of the Lukachukai Mountains and encourages people to buy authentic Navajo jewelry from true artists who possess a true love for their work and their customers.

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“If they’re a great artist, just look at their hands. If they’re just a supply runner, their hands are clean,” he said, showing his rough, stained and calloused hands.

Information: www.gonavajo.com