

Navajo husband-wife team work together to create traditional 1800s style jewelry

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Friday, 25 October 2019 07:53



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SMITH LAKE, N.M. - Damon Thompson, 61, creates authentic Navajo jewelry in the style of his late great-great grandfather, Charlie Davis.

Originally from Mariano Lake, N.M., Thompson said he began making jewelry in 1980, starting off with nickel silver creations. Today, he only makes sterling silver pieces, with the assistance of his wife, Marie.

“We both work together. We do men and ladies watch bracelets, bowguards, bracelets [anywhere from one-half-inch wide to five-inches wide], buckles, bolo ties, and concho belts. We do a little bit of rings and earrings, too,” he said.

Thompson said his wife has small hands, which match perfectly with bezel and stone setting duties.

“She does a lot of work,” he said, adding that they only work with quality stones like Kingman turquoise.

A room inside their house serves as their shop, with a large table dominating the room. There is no curtain and this is by design, to let in the maximum amount of sunlight. Another table with a buffing machine and grinder is positioned in the corner.

The husband and wife team sit at opposite sides of the main work table, with one stamping and soldering while the other sets up bezels and places stones. The collaboration is reminiscent of another hardworking duo that created Navajo jewelry two centuries earlier.

Thompson’s great-great cheii was Charlie Davis, who was born in the 1800s.

“This is a family hand-down,” he said. “This is an old-style bracelet. [Cheii] married my másání,

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who was from Ramah, N.M. They got married and they started silversmithing.”

Thompson’s secret recipe for old style bracelets is a modern take in the vein of his grandfather’s work: 24-gauge silver plate, 8-gauge half round, 18-gauge twist wire, 28-gauge scalloped bezel, tear drops, Sleeping Beauty turquoise, and his personal blend of family stamps.

His grandfather’s original style was more labor intensive, however.

“Back then, they only had chunks of silver and they started by pounding it and making their own bezel, half round, everything...even their own plate. That’s where it originated from, this style,” he said.

Thompson’s family was united in their love and work of silversmithing. Cheii’s style was passed down from generation to generation. He learned the intricacies of the craft and family secrets of the trade from his late sister, Laura.

It took quite a while to get to this point and make jewelry like this, he said.

“I don’t know if you call it perfection,” he said with a laugh. “Whatever you call it, it took time for me to get here.”

The process for jewelry making for the Thompsons begins with the purchase of turquoise.

“This turquoise is very expensive. These are not cheap, as you can see. We buy the turquoise first. That’s what we go by on how wide it’s going to be, that is how we start,” he said.

About three years ago, the couple took their jewelry to Navajo Arts and Crafts Enterprise and forged a relationship that continues to this day.

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“One day, we just went over there and they bought us out,” he said, laughing. “They took everything. They treat us really good. Whatever price we’re asking for, we get. Julia [Hoskie] is really good to us.”

They also sell their jewelry at the local flea markets. They do not enter into juried art shows, however, because the entry fees are too high.

Thompson also works as a pipeline worker and is a proud member of the Pipeliners Union.

“I’ve been with the union for maybe 25 years, working with the union pipeline. I sandblast a lot of pipes for coating. I do pipeline coating and a lot of labor work. It looks like I’m old, but I can keep up with these young people,” he said.

As a silversmith, he is equally industrious with his wife, and said they can create 13 bracelets in the span of about two days, working nine hours a day.

Thompson is currently teaching the family trade to his grandson, who can now make rings and small jewelry pieces. His three daughters did not have an interest in making jewelry, but he is determined to pass the tradition on to his grandkids.

“I’m trying to pass it on. I tell them to learn it. I’m not going to be around and they need to learn,” he said in Navajo.

The secret to happiness is being positive, according to Thompson.

“Be positive, don’t be negative. Don’t look back, you have to look forward. Look forward at what’s ahead. Don’t dwell on your past. Be happy and be kind to one another, tied with K’é,” he said.

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Daily prayer is important, he said, adding that praying for your home, kids, grandkids and even your meals is important.

“Pray about how you’re going to make your jewelry, that’s what I think, that’s my philosophy,” he said.

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