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Part-time hobby develops into full-time passion

On the second Saturday evening each month, during the downtown Arts Crawl, you can find Marla Chavez and her standout jewelry collection at Coal Street Pub.

Elegantly displayed on a round table draped with white fabric, plastic forms showcase her earring and necklace collections.

On the wrist of translucent replicas of human hands hold a bracelet or two, and a few pair of iridescent, highly textured dichroic glass earrings lay directly on the table.

Chavez sets up a professional display, and each completed necklace, pair of earrings or bracelet starts out as a silver strand – a canvas to create her one-of-a-kind pieces utilizing natural gemstones, Swarovski crystals and beads.

Chavez, the owner of Designs By “Marla D,” actually moonlights as a jeweler. She works for the city as an executive assistant in the mayor’s and city manager’s office. Instead of resorting to the couch with remote in hand after a long day at the office, she elects to get crafty.

While humble about her gift of creating whimsical and elegant pieces, she said getting things straight and symmetrical has taken years of practice.

And she caught the jewelry-making bug by happenstance. The bead seed was planted after she witness some relatives crafting jewels.

“I have cousins that do beadwork,” she said. “It wasn’t really the medium as it was what they were making.”

Looking for new stones and beads has become second nature. When she travels with her husband Ramon Chavez, she is often fortunate enough to strike up a conversation with small town locals to get some great deals on jewelry supplies.

On a recent trip to Silver City, NM, locals led her to the home of a prolific bead collector. Upon entering the house, there were few signs of a collection. But stashed away in the cabinets and niches were a hidden treasure trove of gemstones and beads. More stuff to add to her growing collection.

Locally, she has her eyes out for supplies as well. Getting deals on gemstones is a priority so she can pass the savings onto her customers. For instance, pricing for a butterfly necklace and matching earrings starts in the $40 range.

“I try to keep prices low,” she said. “It’s nice to be able to afford to buy them.”

Chavez credits University of New Mexico-Gallup and Thunderbird Supply Co. for classes that have taught her a thing or two about her craft.

She has learned that working with silver allows little wriggle room for error, so she emphasized

that patience is essential to creating optimum pieces.

“It’s silver wire … so there’s not a lot of room for error,” she said.

And no two pieces are the same, for the most part. She limits the re-creation of a particular set of earrings and necklace to three times.

Chavez, who hails from California, moved to Gallup when she was a teenager and has been here ever since.

“The town and people kind of grab you, “ she said.

But, her love for life in Gallup and natural enthusiasm were almost cut short when she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer more than a year ago. The mother and stepmother with a combined family of six children and three grandchildren didn’t back down from the challenge.

“It took a lot of surgeries,” adding that she has been in remission since July 2014.

Additionally, recovering from a close call has drawn her closer to family.

“You really do appreciate things more,” she said.

This of course, goes for designing jewelry. Chavez is currently in the process of building a new website and “Designs By Marla D” has a Facebook like page and Pinterest account set up so customers can view her wearable art.

To contact Marla, send her an email: marlade@msn.com