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The Alternative Jewelry Shop celebrates 20 years

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Libby Barnes looks through a scrapbook of memories from the time she's spent in The Alternative Jewelry Shop with her husband Danny. The couple's shop has been open on Main Street for the past 20 years. (Photo by Laura Butler / May 26, 2011)

When Danny and Libby Barnes opened their jewelry shop on Main Street 20 years ago, they had a goal to create custom pieces of jewelry by recycling old jewelry into new works of art. And while the size of the store and some of the [technology](#) they use to create their pieces have changed in the past two decades, the creative process and their passion for the craft have not.

And neither has their love for each other — as they celebrate the store's 20-year anniversary, they're also preparing to celebrate 22 years of marriage.

The two met while taking a painting class at Eastern Kentucky University, then took a jewelry-making class together and from there, they just kind of stumbled onto the idea to open their own business, The Alternative Jewelry Shop, Danny said.

They used to rent a small portion of the building they're in now and work in an upstairs studio, but the Barneses expanded and bought the store in 2000 and quickly made it their own. They even have a rock patio out back, complete with a fountain, where they take breaks and grill lunch.



The store is a work of art in and of itself. Almost every piece of furniture and display case in the shop was handmade, and the artworks adorning each corner and spanning the walls were made by local painters, photographers and woodworkers. Libby made the stained-glass window between the workshop and the store.

They view each of their products as artworks, too.

“We’re artists before we’re jewelers,” Danny said. “We work in gold, silver and diamonds — those are all our materials.”

“It’s like a little art gallery in here,” Libby said.

They also carry art and jewelry from other local artists and even some from across the world — the farthest being from New Zealand. Each part of the shop has a story, and the Barneses can tell you each one.

The same is true for each piece of jewelry they’ve made. Each commissioned piece Danny and Libby make is unique and tailored to the customer’s unique requests and specifications. Taking family heirlooms and recycling them into new pieces as tastes change and jewelry gets passed down to younger family members is the “bread and butter” of what the Barneses do. Some of their most unique pieces have been designs involving request to design jewelry based on a family pet’s teeth or hair. They’ve even encapsulated two dogs’ ashes in little pendants on a bracelet. They never know what someone will come in wanting next.

“It’s an honor to be a part of their wedding, or to help them remember a loved one,” Libby said.

Danny and Libby develop relationships with their customers as they complete the work, and that’s part of why many of their customers continue to come back for more jewelry

and start new projects. When someone commissions a piece, the entire process can take from 12 to 16 weeks. It begins with discussions of what the customer is looking for; then the Barneses create renderings of what the piece will look like with a computer program, a change from several years ago as new technology became available. Then, the renderings get sent to the customer via e-mail, and once approved, Danny and Libby carve wax designs with another machine as a model for the final product. The customer then comes in to view the wax carving and approve it.

“It takes a significant amount of trust for someone to trust us with their precious metal and stones,” Danny said. “We do develop that relationship with them throughout the whole process.”



The newer technology the Barneses have acquired has allowed them to increase their customer base and make the world “a little smaller than it used to be.” The Internet has allowed Danny and Libby to expand their customer base across the country to Chicago, **California** and **Florida**, and even across the **Atlantic Ocean** to England. The jewelers also use **Facebook**, Twitter and a website to further

their business. Some of their new machines and software also allow them to try new forms of jewelry making, including engraving photos onto pendants and taking a wax mold of people’s fingerprints and working them into the pieces. Danny and Libby even wear each other’s thumbprints.

The Barneses have no plans on slowing down.

“We’re just going to keep on doing what we’re doing and try to continue to evolve as artists,” Libby said.

“We’re really lucky to be able to do what we enjoy, and our customers just keep coming to see us.”

For more information about The Alternative Jewelry Shop, and to see some of the pieces Danny and Libby Barnes have designed, visit their website at www.alternativejewelryshop.com or find them on Facebook at The Alternative Jewelry Shop.