



Shining Example

LOCAL INDEPENDENT JEWELRY STORE MAKES MEMORIES

BY CAROL WEIR | PHOTO BY ROB KAUFMAN

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THE BEST THING ABOUT FORSYTHE JEWELERS IS THE RELAXED, FRIENDLY ATTITUDE

On a chilly, overcast, late autumn morning somewhere in Ohio, a woman puts on a pair of earrings that make her remember a perfect summer day at the beach.

The day went like this: In the morning, the family rose in their rented villa on Hilton Head Island, gathered their things and rode a small fleet of yellow bikes to the beach. The parents set up shop under a beach umbrella while the children took off running toward the waves. After a full day of swimming, building sandcastles and strolling on the sand, the family went home, took showers and headed to The Shops at Sea Pines Center. It was time for their annual pilgrimage to Forsythe Jewelers.

Store owner Andrea Bragg welcomed them and remembered the family from past visits. While the mother browsed the latest collections from designers Roberto Coin, Marco Bicego, LAGOS, David Yurman and John Hardy, staff cleaned and polished the necklace and rings she had worn into the shop. To reimburse the gate fee the family paid to enter Sea Pines, Bragg slipped the husband a light green envelope with \$6 inside. When their son complained he was thirsty, a sales person handed him a bottle of water. Another staff member rolled a stretchy plastic bracelet over the daughter's tiny wrist and tilted a mirror so she could see herself.

In the end, the woman selected a pair of 18-karat yellow gold Roberto Coin drop earrings, small enough for everyday wear but with a sophisticated look she loved. She added a couple of items to her wish list – which Forsythe keeps on file for each customer – and then the parents took pictures of their children with the alligator

sculpture outside the store before heading across the plaza to dinner at Truffles Cafe. It was the perfect day, and every time she put the earrings on during the long, snowy Ohio winter, the woman was reminded of the sun-drenched Lowcountry coast.

Bragg and her staff at Forsythe say this scenario plays out for both locals and island visitors – minus the snow, of course.

“Some customers come right from the beach, in their bathing suits and cover-ups, and we don't mind a bit,” she said.

In addition to a much wider selection of jewelry than seems possible in a store of its size, the best thing about Forsythe Jewelers is the relaxed, friendly attitude of Bragg and her staff. This is not a store where those who come in to browse feel intimidated and leave quickly. Bragg's enthusiasm for jewelry at all price points and the way she treats every shopper like a friend quickly put people at ease. She's also a great source of recommendations for good local restaurants and things to do.

Bragg bought the business two years ago after working there for 14 years. She couldn't bear the thought that the store might close when original owner Debbie Berling retired. It turned out Berling was thinking the same thing, and she asked Bragg to take over.

“I love the relationships that I have with my customers, and I love to be on the sales floor,” said Bragg, who makes three buying trips a year to ensure that Forsythe keeps up with trends and offers new items. Customers often tell her they find Forsythe's selection comparable to the offerings at large jewelry retailers in New York, Los Angeles and other major cities.

Bragg knows her regular customers so well that when she's at jewelry shows, she imagines who would like each piece. She and her husband – Ray Bragg, the head golf pro at Sea Pines Country Club – are recognized wherever they go on Hilton Head. Their daughters Abbey and Julia work at the store when they're home from college. The store also offers free delivery on Hilton Head Island and in Bluffton, often the same day.

All of these things make Bragg confident that her small business will continue to thrive in an era when Internet shopping is gaining market share. Shopping for jewelry on a computer has none of the pleasures of coming into Forsythe. Customers can't see the piece shine, can't try it on and, most importantly, can't hear the warmth in her voice when Bragg points out what's new in the store. **M**

The Forsythe team: (front row) Barb Panciera, owner Andrea Bragg, Tammy Bradley and Rebecca Lovette (Back Row): Katelin Chapman, Elaine Kohler, Keith Tillman, Laurie McKenzie and Lindsey Clare

CATHERINE CANINO JEWELRY

These beautiful pearls are hand created from mother of pearl shells. Collected by South Sea fisherman at depths of 50-150 meters the large shells are carved into bead shapes, then laquered and polished over 18 times to draw out the natural color and luster.

The result is an organic, handmade, lustrous pearl. 18k gold plate.

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