

Mechanical ability leads to islander's passion for jewelry

By Eileen M. Daly

Islander Charlie Phillips, owner of Gold Lady Jewelers in Wickford, hasn't had a vacation in eight years.

"The business is my life," he said. "I'm the first one here in the morning and the last one to leave at night."

Phillips came into the business that now consumes his time in a rather circuitous way. He began his entrepreneurial career as a manufacturer of custom surfboards while still in his twenties.

"Back then, there was no Internet and really no way of learning how to do it except trial and error. It was all very secretive. No one would tell you anything because they were all your competitors so we had to learn as we went along," Phillips said.

Phillips relied on his natural mechanical ability, a skill set he leaned on once again while learning the jewelry business. "It helped that I am mechanically inclined," he said.

The surfboard business did well, Phillips said, but the winters were lean, so he began to branch out – first in the bicycle business and later, in the jewelry business.

"Back then (in the late 1970s), there was a shortage of 10-speed bicycles. It was right at the beginning of the bicycle madness phase, so we started to sell bicycles out of the back of the surfboard business," he said.

Always on the lookout for

more ways to profit, Phillips said he "hooked up with a gentleman who worked with wholesale American Indian jewelry."

He soon added that business to his growing list of endeavors.

But the jewelry business is the one that finally took hold of Phillips.

By 1979, he'd closed the bike and surfboard shop, bought out his partner in the American Indian jewelry business, and opened the first Gold Lady Jewelers in a small storefront next to its current location in Wickford.

"We moved into the building next door. It's a little candy store now," he said.

It was 1980, and the gold market was hot, Phillips said.

"We were doing a lot of gold buying then," he said, "a bit of gold jewelry and some watches." By 1984, Phillips had moved his store into its present location.

"We moved into larger quarters next door and sank all of the money back into the business. That's when I really expanded into jewelry and really learned the jewelry trade," he said.

Once again, his mechanical ability – and his trial-and-error method – served him well.

"I didn't go to school," he said. "I couldn't go to school and work at the same time, so I figured it out through trial and error, the same as the surfboards."

After a while, Phillips said, he became proficient at the jewelry trade.



Jamestowner Charlie Phillips spends much of his time behind the counter at Gold Lady Jewelers, his jewelry shop in Wickford.

Photo by Jeff McDonough

"It was easier than surfboards," he said. "At least there weren't any chemical compositions to figure out."

But that didn't mean there wasn't plenty to learn. From stone setting and restoration to repair and design, Phillips soon learned it all.

While technical proficiency is important, Phillips said, credibility and reputation are the most important assets of his business.

"I'm here all the time," he said. "All of the work is done

right here on site and everything is locked up every night. My reputation is the most important thing that I have."

Over the years, Phillips has established procedures to insure that credibility and it has paid off in loyal customers, he said.

"I have a lot of customers who will only do business with me. If they are away in Florida, they will wait until they come home to bring their jewelry in," he said.

In addition to his retail customer business, he often does

work for other jewelry companies who out source their repair work, Phillips said.

Phillips knows that jewelry is very personal and is often valued as much for its sentiment as its actual worth, so he takes great care to reassure his customers.

"If they want to watch me repair something, that's fine," he said. "I understand that people are very attached to certain items of jewelry, that there is great sentiment attached. That's why we lock up every piece that belongs to a customer every night, regardless of how much it is worth," he said.

Although Phillips said he understands why customers might be fearful of leaving their jewelry at a store for repairs, he said there are things a customer can do to protect themselves and their jewelry.

"I don't think people should be worried, I think they should be diligent," Phillips said. "There are some questions you can ask to make sure you are dealing with a credible and trustworthy company, such as 'Is the work done on site?' 'Does it get locked up every night?' and 'Is it insured while it is there?'"

At Gold Lady Jewelers, the answers to those questions are yes, yes and yes, Phillips said.

Gold Lady Jewelers is located at One Brown Street in Wickford. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.

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