

Feature Friday – Alex Maryaskin



ALEX MARYASKIN
Simply Unique Jewelry Designs
Yorktown, Virginia



Meet the Simply Unique team

I started in the jewelry business after doing restoration work to a 2000-year-old church. I was tasked with repairing a filigree box, in addition to a few more items after finishing that job. This is where my love of jewelry stemmed. In the Ukraine, you have to spend two years in the military. The choice was either being outside in -20°F weather or working on and repairing jewelry for the generals in the warmth of indoors. I chose inside.

In our business, you will meet and overcome challenges nearly every day. We have clients come in after they're told their items are beyond repair. Yet a few days later, they return to our store to pick up their renewed, wearable pieces of jewelry. By regularly overcoming challenges, the word has

spread on how we can repair almost anything. Customers flock with belt buckles, lamp shades, purses, and more items you would never imagine. And if we can, we get it done! In the meantime, we're able to sell them a chain, ring, or even a diamond sometimes!

My job title in the store is owner, alongside Tim Wright, another bench jeweler who shares ownership. We met when I originally tried to sell a filigree mirror I made. We opened [Simply Unique Jewelry Designs](#) together after losing creative freedom in the store where we both previously worked. Tim taught me the American way of jewelry production rather than the Ukrainian style with which I was most familiar. He opened a door for me and a bench in his home, saying, "create!" To this day, he is the business partner that pushes ahead to keep that same momentum going. As for me, I am 48 years young, and my wife is a nurse at a local hospital. I have a daughter in her second year of college, and my 12-year-old son is in middle school. I've been in the industry about 25 years in total.



In the store, I work on the bench more than anything else. I do custom work and repairs for our clients, despite how ridiculous they may seem. Typically, I only wait on clients when everyone else is busy or when I must discuss custom work. I also take care of a 300-gallon saltwater coral reef aquarium in our store. Visitors are taken back by the beauty of this tank when they walk in our store! It makes a wonderful babysitter for kids and especially bored husbands while mom is at the counter. This is a hobby that I enjoy, and it keeps me busy when we are not.

Simply Unique Jewelry Designs is very different than all the others in the area because we do not carry the range of designer lines. We have a few things like Citizen watches, RQC charms, and bridal from a few unnamed American manufacturers. We have our own category. But the real difference is we create 60-70% of our inventory right here. We have mentored two individuals fresh out of art school with metals backgrounds, granting them the freedom to create and make jewelry for our cases. We've taught them repair as they have created for us in return. We also have a couple of apprentices right now that are learning the bench; one has become quite good, especially in silver, a medium I despise.

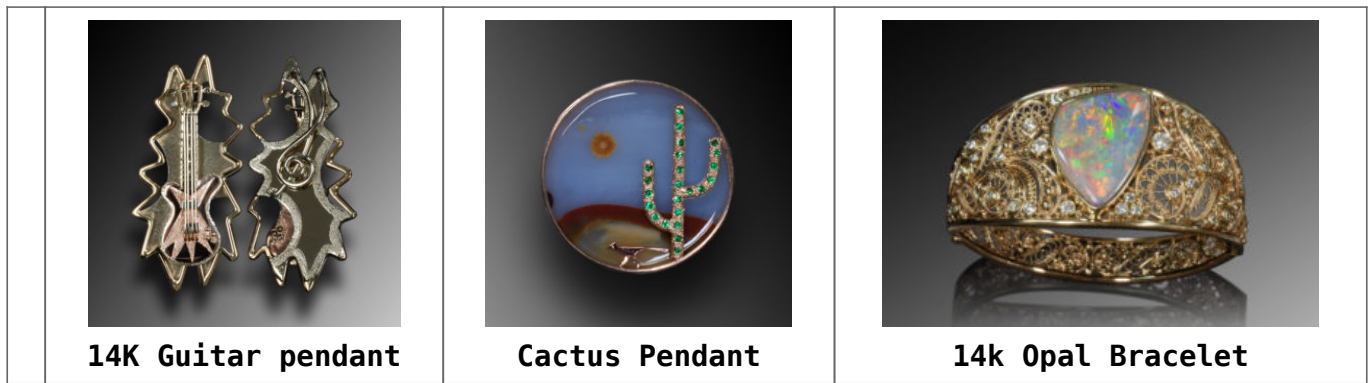
In 2014, I won a Saul Bell Design Award for the Hollowware category for a filigree mirror that I made from melted down quarters. This remains my most favorite memory. I had to pour them into an ingot mold, and then I pulled all the wire hand. From there, I created this beautiful mirror, on the right. This year I was notified that I got into finals for a chance to win another Saul Bell Award for the *Discovery of Eggcellence* piece. [Read all about this egg-squisite piece here on stuller.com.](#)



I could not imagine our business without a [laser welder](#). This tool has changed the way we imagine projects and how we approach any piece of jewelry. We hand fabricate almost everything in our inventory. We keep everything on hand from flat stock to tubing to any gauge wire from 12g to 32g in white and yellow. While most stores carry a large inventory of designer goods, all of our stock is in wire or raw material. I am just beginning to learn CAD design, but we are still old school when it comes to wax carving. One of our mentored art students, Chels Tyler, is in Minneapolis and she still carves

for us. She is amazing when it comes to carving animals and creatures – from bats to horses and mermaids to shotguns.

I was introduced to Stuller many years ago while working at another jewelry store. It was the first account we opened when Tim and I started our store, providing a blessed partnership from day one. Since opening, we have doubled our size and staff. We can attribute much of our good fortune to how we practice business, our ethics, and finally Stuller! We have made promises to our customers, and Stuller has always delivered on their promises, so we don't let our customers down. Sustained growth in all the facets of what Stuller does has enabled our store to grow in the same manner.



I base the following suggestions to those who work on in a store. If you don't already offer in-house work, I do not think you will exist as a jewelry store 10 years from now. If your store does not have at least one laser welder (we have two), then a bench jeweler will not be able to compete with current challenges. Simply put, if one does not adapt and change, then one will cease to exist. Because of this, we are now branching into CAD design with the [ever&ever](#)[®] program with Stuller. I see the writing on the wall.

One of our biggest challenges remains the fight against the internet and the cheap quality sold to people as jewelry. The poor workmanship causes designs to break. But pieces made with this low-quality manufacturing methods used overseas seem to attract our clients' attention. And when they buy, they wind up bringing their items to us for repair. The internet, free

of sales tax, has forced us to lower our already dwindling margins, making it harder to exist, much less flourish. I wish the best of luck to all of us in the jewelry-making future.

Read more about [Alex Maryaskin's *Discovery of Eggcellence* piece here](#).