

The Art of Reinvention

MASTER JEWELER AND DESIGNER
GREG NEELEY'S JOURNEY OF
DISCOVERY AND INNOVATION

BY ELIZABETH RAFFEL

When I first spoke to Greg, he had just found out he was one of five finalists in the gold/platinum category for the 2018 Saul Bell Award, an international contest for jewelry designers. He won in 2013 and hopes to win this year, but competition is fierce.

He designs modern jewelry, and many pieces feature unusual prong-free settings. Each creation reflects the craftsmanship you'd expect of an industry veteran with 40+ years of experience.

Greg has made an art of changing with industry demands by using his ability to reinvent himself, his craft, and his dreams. To understand, look to his early years in a sparsely populated corner of Colorado.

AT HOME IN THE MOUNTAINS

Cortez is a small city in the foothills of southwest Colorado. Nestled in a valley between Mesa Verde National Park and the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, it sits amid nationally designated lands that encompass more than 20,000 ancestral Puebloan archaeological sites dating to 1050-1300 CE.

Here, Greg grew up surrounded by breathtaking vistas, ancient cultures, and artistically talented relatives and community members. This environment shaped his art: echoes of mountains and Native American heritage appear in his designs.



Custom jeweler Greg Neeley lives in Georgetown, Texas. He and his wife, Kanae Fukuhara, have created an innovative jewelry and sculpture store. Ms. Fukuhara's elegant minimalism pervades the narrow, light-filled space as it flows to a clear view of Greg's manufacturing area. The store's simple layout welcomes clients into a peaceful environment. Here, they can gather their thoughts and express ideas about the jewelry they want Greg to design. Customer stations have touch screens, giving them access to his online catalog.

A BUDDING ENTREPRENEUR

At 16, Greg left school and joined his older brother's jewelry manufacturing business, Cortez Silver and Turquoise Co. It was 1972. "The craze for Southwest Native American jewelry was taking off," he says. "It was an opportunity to make and sell high-quality silver and turquoise Navajo jewelry. I saw jewelry as a substitute for my real dream of being a sculptor."

The business grew, eventually employing 40 Navajo artisans. They cast 2,000 rings per week and handmade an additional 1,000. Greg's brother had his pilot's license, so the company bought a small Cessna to travel the Southwest selling their products.

Eventually, competition selling low-quality merchandise wore away at profits. The brothers realized it was time to try something new.

A NEW SHOP IN TOWN

In 1981, Greg seized an opportune time to open Desert Gold+, a custom jewelry shop in Cortez. The government was building a dam on the Dolores River, and a large company moved in to tap into a new carbon dioxide dome. Both projects attracted people and money—exactly what Greg needed.

He prospered, improving his craft as he expanded his design capabilities and vision. Come 1987, business slowed. "I'd made custom jewelry for everyone in the region," he said. "They had completed the dam and depleted the carbon dioxide. What's my next move?"

DRAGONS, UNICORNS, AND MORE

Flexibility and timing served Greg well. While searching for opportunity, he met the owner of Comstock Creations, a giftware company producing products in pewter. The owner hired Greg to carve a fantasy creature jewelry line. On seeing his work, Comstock asked Greg to carve larger versions for a figurine line. These sold well, and Greg ultimately created 3,000 models.

HEY, ISN'T THAT A SCULPTURE?

"When I started, I saw jewelry as a substitute for sculpting, my true passion," Greg said. "I realized designing and creating jewelry is sculpting." While at Comstock, he wanted to explore sculpting and opened a foundry called Desperado Bronze. Then, he turned to modern sculptures and worked with other metals and media. In 1998, he embraced the future: CAD. He sold work at trade shows



North Face Princess Engagement



Cage Fire 2013 Saul Bell Winner

and had a boutique at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. In 2008, en route to a one-man show in West Hollywood, the financial downturn pulled the rug from under his market. "I had invested a lot in this show and had high hopes. Attendance wasn't what we expected, and those who came looked but mostly didn't buy," Greg said. Once again, he had reached a crossroads.

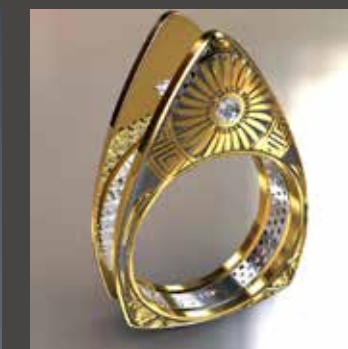
BACK TO THE FUTURE

After soul-searching, his future emerged. "I loved sculpting, but I realized it didn't come to me as naturally as jewelry," Greg says. "And having worked in Rhino, I had a sense of new possibilities for jewelry design." Using CAD, he felt he could create designs he imagined in the 1980s. But

he needed jewelry-specific software. He chose RhinoGold.

At 4:30 each morning, he sat at his computer, exploring new possibilities. His designs gained traction, and when he won the 2013 Saul Bell Award for 'Caged Fire,' he took his custom design career to the next level.

Later, he met Kanae, and their vision resulted in Greg and Kanae's Jewelry and Art. Is Georgetown his destination? Who can say? The store reflects an inspiring aesthetic, and Greg loves his community. For now, this is his home.



RhinoGold®

Greg Neeley created all four designs shown using RhinoGold. "After using CAD for sculpture, I realized it would let me create some of the designs I had imagined back in the 1980s but I needed a program with more jewelry specific tools. After looking at a few I chose RhinoGold."

Left: 2018 Saul Bell Finalist

Right: Hopi Pottery Ladies' Ring