

Warburton's Gallery Gemma Jewellery 10 years at Alton Mill Arts Centre

By Constance Scrafield

Anne Marie Warburton recently celebrated the 10th anniversary of her jewellery business, Gallery Gemma Jewellery, at the Alton Mill Arts Centre.

Both Warburton's Gallery Gemma Jewellery space at the Alton Mill and the building itself are well worth the visit. Where modern blends with antique in a way that has been lovingly and skillfully executed, the Alton Mill is a fine example of how and why to preserve heritage buildings while making them truly functional.

Holding to the overall theme of the Alton Mill, Warburton's Gallery Gemma Jewellery, flanked by two art galleries on one side and the entrance into the Mill on the other, respects, with deep affection, the historical aspect of her space while offering the visitor that easy open modern approach to display that makes every treasure clearly visible.

In a telephone interview, she explained her long ascent into the business for which she has such passion. It really began with her attending night school at York University to earn her B.A. in business studies. This was through a program sponsored by her then employer, General Foods, an equal opportunity initiative to give women the chance to escape the inevitable pigeon hole of being a secretary. Having completed her education, she was promoted to buyer in the packaging department.

She worked for some years, dealing in the business of packaging.

From there, Warburton took up selling advertisements for Yellow Pages with considerable success.

'Yellow Pages paid a lot of money,' she told us, 'but it was not my passion. David (Warburton) encouraged me to follow my passion.'

'I went back to school with the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), based in Irving (city), on line.'

Warburton was the proverbial duck to water with this style of study.

'I loved it,' she averred. 'I met people from all over the world, some of whom are still dear friends. There was much more direct access to professors and I studied with passion.'

For practical, hands-on learning with actual gem stones, in this connection, Warburton went to Manhattan to take courses there.

Her studies and graduation from GIA took two years, including a jewelry business program.

Although her studies continued with other institutions, Warburton was now looking for premises in which to open her Gallery Gemma Jewellery. At that time, the Blue Mountain complex at Collingwood was looking for a jeweller and although she agreed to the lease in theory, almost signing twice, her hand was held by delays on the part of the other party.

'Then, I had the chance at the Alton Mill. There was funding for renovations,' she explained, having told us about the early days when Carl Borgstrom used the whole ground floor 'the front third' for his kitchen business, to build cabinets and so forth.

The vacated space was divided into three parts, of which she took the third and occupied it as the sole business in the entire area.

'I was on my own,' she reminisced.

They were worrying times, when 'I thought I was crazy' 'I was so thrilled when someone came in with a special occasion' a birthday, anniversary 'then, the community started to come' word of mouth and 10 years after, here I am.'

In spite of the long list: 'bench studies in Toronto,' as her website informs us, 'Haliburton School of Fine Arts, GIA, New York, . . . New Approach School in Virginia (and) private yearly instruction with a gold smith in Santa Fe . . .' Warburton assured us: 'I am always studying, learning more' all these things lead to 'where else can I go from a design perspective?'

A portion of Gallery Gemma Jewellery's product is certainly Warburton's work.

She loves to make custom pieces and tells us, 'There's this wonderful thing that happens when someone sits across from you and they want a piece of jewellery made for them, say, a ring, for example, and all they can tell you is what they don't want, rarely what they do want. So, I can strip away all that to make the right thing for them.'

However, it is clear that there is much more to the stock for sale in Gallery Gemma Jewellery than custom-made items worth thousands of dollars.

'We have things for all prices' '\$20, \$30,' Warburton said. 'So many people wind up at the Alton Mill by driving around (rather than intention). They're not expecting to come into a jewelry shop and spend thousands of dollars but a less expensive piece' '\$30 to \$50' they'll buy that.'

Of the inevitable foibles of advertising, she remarked wryly, 'People come in and say, 'I've seen your ad' and it's taken 10 years for them to come. People come here once and then they bring their visitors' they're proud of this place.'

To explain what it all means to her, she put it that, 'Just being part of the community lives at the most important time of their lives' women who have lost their husbands and want a piece of jewellery remade 'the anniversaries, the special dates.'

It matters to her that she gives back to the community the way she does best: for many years, she has made a valuable piece of jewellery as part of Theatre Orangeville's Victorian Christmas Gala, its largest fundraiser of the year; she has given pieces to the SPCA to auction, or remade some jewellery that has been donated but is unsaleable or can be improved in value by her.

Even though those early days at the Alton Mill raised questions as to the wisdom of settling there, Warburton now has a great affection and respect for the place and its owners, the Seaton Group or, more personally, the Grant "brothers, we call them," she said.

"They work very hard here. The Mill is a real dedication to the arts," she added. "The majority of (artist) tenants have been here a long time - the vibe couldn't be better."

Warburton is ambitious on a couple of fronts: "I want the Alton Mill to be a household name far and wide."

For herself, in reference to her online business, which brings her customers from across Canada, "I would like to be that online presence so that when a husband forgets something I can be there for him . . ."