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Bowman Jewelers: Not so difficult

By Wanda Freeman

It's easy to understand why Bowman Jewelers might forget its own birthday: It doesn't look its age. When customers visit the retailer in Johnson City, Tenn., they see a storefront chosen in 1999 for its mall-infused high traffic - not the establishment that started in a barbershop 95 years ago.

"I just kind of realized it was 95," says Linda Bowman O'Dell, third generation co-owner of the store with her brother, Rob Bowman. For this quarter at least, she's concentrating on noting the milestone with special ads and promotions pushing awareness of the store's longevity.

"We're saving the huge celebration for our 100th year."

And huge it will be - O'Dell believes the store is not just the oldest jeweler, but the oldest retailer in the area.

The jeweler's story began when O'Dell's grandfather, Robert W. Bowman - a German immigrant and the youngest in



(L-R) Kaitlen McBride, Victoria Bowman Duever, Robert W. Bowman III, Linda Bowman O'Dell, Chloe O'Dell.

his family - went to watchmaking school. It was the early 1900s, and wristwatches were a new thing replacing pocket watches. He traveled to Pennsylvania to become a certified horologist before joining other family members in and around eastern Tennessee.

In 1927, Bowman began his business by renting a space for his bench in the back of a downtown barber shop. Two years later he opened his own store and employed four other watchmakers.

His wife, Janelle Bowman, who always had a passion for gemstones, nudged him to add jewelry.

"My grandmother talked him into putting a couple of jewelry cases in, and they started selling pearls and birthstone jewelry. She really couldn't participate in the business at the time with six children at home," O'Dell says.

But in 1945, Robert died at age 48, and Janelle took over the business. A great aunt came to live with them and help with

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Apollo courts independent jewelers with tested bestsellers

By Deborah Yonick

Apollo Manufacturing Inc. is a leading producer and supplier of fine diamond and color stone gold jewelry - well-made essential, daily wear with a twist - to major retailers like Macy's and Bloomingdale's.

But the company, founded in New York City in 2011, is eager to partner with more independent retail jewelers to deliver its consumer market-tested bestsellers and profitable custom design services.

For more than a decade, Apollo has been laser focused on doing what it does best, delivering quality products with the highest perceived value.

Apollo provides a variety of programs - from price point fashion to bridal and anniversary to essential everyday basics - that



are fully customizable to meet the jeweler's needs.

"We have our own dedicated team of CAD designers, who introduce 50-80 sure shot bestsellers into the market every month," explains Jai Sadhwani, founder and owner of Apollo. "With our own CAD team in house, custom jewelry is something we don't shy away from. In fact, we encourage our retail partners to pursue this profitable service."

Apollo has three manufacturing facilities worldwide, and works only with natural gemstones, affiliated with several De Beers diamond sightholders.

"We manage every aspect of production from start to finish to provide the best products and services for our retail partners," explains Sadhwani. "That allows us to control costs, guarantee quality, and innovate our products - it's
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Jeweler's Pearls and Puptails event breeds success

By Paul Holewa

Nothing conveys feel good more than puppies.

That's probably the main reason Royal Jewelers has done so well with their Pearls and Puptails events over the last four years. Last Christmas, the Louisville, Kentucky-based jeweler decided to make the event the store's main event for the holiday season.

The most recent Pearls and Puptails was scheduled nine days before Christmas, making it a "Howl-iday" event for the family-owned jewelers and their customers. The event is the brainchild of third-generation jewelers Amy and John Schulwolf. She's quick to admit that the jewelry portion of the event isn't exclusively about pearls. She's simply fond of the alliteration in the event's name. *See Pups page 10*



Amy, Jonathan and Lynn Schulwolf, owners of Royal Jewelers, with Hot Chocolate at the latest Pearls & Puptails event. Photo Marty King.

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BOWMAN

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the house and children.

"It was quite rare in the 1940s for a woman to take over a business like that," O'Dell says. "She stayed active and ran the business and didn't retire until around 1997, when she was about 86 years old."

Two of Janelle and Robert's children - James J. Bowman and

As economic realities changed, the store moved several times in pursuit of higher traffic. Downtown businesses declined as malls proliferated beginning in the 1970s, and in 1999 Bowman Jewelers moved to a shopping strip in North Johnson City.

The store's youthful facade belies the retailer's enduring reputation. Bowman Jewelers has supported and bonded with Eastern Tennessee State University since the 1940s and is the area's

Belgium, for some 20 years in connection with IJO. The rewards were quickly apparent.

"We can buy directly from the cutters. ... It gives more of an advantage to our small store competing with the big-box stores," she says. "It started off as just a fun trip, and we made friends and lasting relationships."

Her connections came in handy during the COVID shutdown, such as when O'Dell had a client seeking a five-carat em-



Market Street on Fountain Square. Bowman's second location, occupied in the 1940s and 50s. Circa 1951.



Janelle Bowman took the helm at the store in 1945 after the death of her husband, Robert.

Robert W. Bowman Jr., Rob and Linda's father - became involved in the 1950s. One was a watchmaker and the other a jeweler.

"We were downtown for about 75 years, and we owned a building on Fountain Square that we rented in the 1960s and purchased in the 1980s."

only Independent Jewelers Organization (IJO) member store.

Rob (Robert W. Bowman III) is an IJO Master Jeweler, gemologist, and craftsman. Linda is a GIA Gemologist and diamond grader and store manager.

As the store's buyer, O'Dell has been traveling to Antwerp,

erald-cut diamond while stores and suppliers everywhere were closed.

"We were able to reach out and engage with suppliers during one of the most difficult times in retail history," she recalls.

O'Dell earned a nickname in Antwerp - a good-humored one



Linda Bowman O'Dell examining diamonds in Antwerp.

that she thinks might not be exclusive to her - La Difficile.

"One of my friends was teasing me, saying I'm difficult and hard to deal with, but I think it's just another word for 'picky,'" she says.

The name is captured in an amusing commercial filmed in Antwerp by IJO, with one of O'Dell's favorite suppliers expressing mock distress over the need to please his difficult - or picky - customer.

O'Dell leverages her buying trips with commercials offering clients a way to become part of the selection process.

"We take special orders a few weeks ahead," she says. Clients make an appointment at the store, where O'Dell shows them sample stones to get an idea of their desires and budgets. They then pay a deposit allowing her to shop for something equal or better.

Tech-savvy customers can even shop virtually.

"We can send videos to phones, and call each other when our clocks meet up, they're not asleep and we're not asleep," she says.

When considering what sets Bowman Jewelers apart, O'Dell sees a combination of factors.

There's the history of a mature business that has stood witness to trends like the comeback of yellow gold in all types of jewelry.

"I keep telling people, don't scrap your yellow gold, it's coming back!"

There are the referrals, like the one that brought in a new customer from New York who decided to wait on a purchase until he could see O'Dell.

There is the clever advertising that allows "Bowman engagement couples" to appear on billboards, social media, and TV ads capturing their proposal moments.

But O'Dell's favorite part of being a jeweler is the relationships built over her nearly 40 years in the business.

"Over the years, people are like best friends. You know when they've been sick or celebrating an anniversary. You send them flowers; you check in on them. Even if they are not necessarily as active a customer as they once were, you still care about them. You make a point of keeping in touch. I'm still friends with customers who saw my daughter as a baby during the first few years, in the store or in a stroller downtown. ...

"It is our loyal customers who have kept us here in business 95 years and counting." SJN MAIN

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