

ART

# Together in life and work

Michelle Meizner and Susan Onaclea have made an art out of commitment

BY SUSAN DETROY



Michelle Meizner (left) and Susan Onaclea make beautiful jewelry together

The business Web site of Michelle Meizner and Susan Onaclea explains: "Two women were drawn together to create something more than themselves. Something that might pay the rent wouldn't hurt either."

Those ever-elusive opposing goals have come together for Meizner and Onaclea, who have been life partners for 14 years and business partners for most of that time. Their first names—"Su"san and "Miche"lle—inspired the name for their jewelry company, Sumiche. Six months ago, the women went from outdoor market and wholesale selling to indoor retail with their newest venture, Vivace Gallery in Eugene.

Meizner describes her past self as an "on-again, off-again" jeweler. She worked for others, ran a jewelry store and sold her

creations to outlets in New York. Primarily self-taught, she preferred to tinker, calling herself a "bulldog with a bone."

Onaclea's previous work includes photography, writing and teaching. She moved from Eugene to New York in the 1980s and was employed as a caregiver but suffered two car accidents, which disabled her. She met Meizner, and the two decided to make the move back to Onaclea's hometown in 1987.

Onaclea saw her partner's fluctuating efforts in jewelry making and took charge setting up a bookkeeping system and

serving as an "organizing, methodical force," Meizner smiles. Onaclea also became involved in the creative process, having a good eye for color as well as the ability to stay focused and to see the "big picture."

Meizner welcomed the input, and in the first year of their relationship, the two designed and made jewelry together, ran a wholesale business and sold at lesbian festivals.

During this period, the couple stuck to Meizner's early designs—mostly lesbian symbols and depictions of diversity. "People pins," Meizner describes them, "butch women, fat women, just looking cool. This was our first statement."

In keeping with that mission, the couple have always been out in their enterprise. "We were vocal about it," Onaclea says, explaining it didn't make any sense for them not to be.

The Sumiche Web site features a photograph of them as a couple. "Our customers are gay and

straight," Onaclea says, claiming both customer bases "respond that they are glad about who we are and glad we make a point of it."

The pair were both active in 1992's No on 9 Campaign, writing letters to fellow businesses revealing Sumiche was lesbian-owned. In their personal lives they decided to do one visible out thing a day, such as holding hands or hugging. This has resulted in loyalty from the sexual minorities community.

Looking for a more visible approach to selling, in the early '90s Meizner and Onaclea

"He and his partner were so nervous and sweating they nearly couldn't get the rings on!"

In fact, the pair have several interesting stories about their clients. One lesbian couple who had been together 30 years had a ceremony on a bed with their dogs. An Illinois man rented a Humvee, showed up with an engagement ring at his boyfriend's work, got on his knee in proposal and whisked him off on an adventure tour.

"We receive thank-you love letters and pictures and words about how important the rings are," Onaclea grins. Both women emphasize how honored they are that customers trust them to provide a treasured product.

Adopting new marketing strategies in the mid-'90s including mailing portfolios to customers and advertising in national publications, Sumiche took off. "We thought the portfolio idea was a good one, but we had no idea!" exclaims Meizner. Now with the Web site, she makes about 350 rings a year.

Meizner and Onaclea recently embarked on a new venture as two of the four owners of Vivace Gallery, the only material outlet of Sumiche Jewelry. The shop shows the work of 30 artists, including other lesbians and gay men. Jeannie Singer, Meizner's mother, also shows her photography at Vivace.

The couple spend time outside their businesses caring for their 4 1/2-acre home in Leaburg, where Onaclea says she feels a responsibility to the land. Like many self-employed people, they talk about the challenge of working at home and learning the boundaries of their various roles.

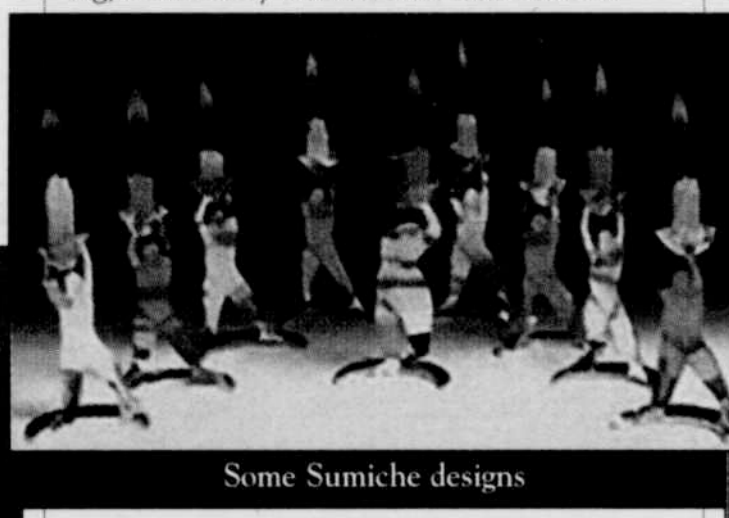
"It's like one big stew pot," Meizner says. "It is hard to see the separate pieces."

Onaclea agrees. "To keep us separate—as in us as relationship, as opposed to us as co-owners—it can be hard to find just us."

But the love of their work makes any challenge worth facing. What else does that Web site say? They have "pooled their resources, pooled their talents, pooled their hearts and visions, and, most importantly of all, they are still loving and learning the work they do."

Visit SUMICHE JEWELRY at [www.sumiche.com](http://www.sumiche.com). Vivace Gallery is located at 207 E. Fifth Ave. in Eugene. For more information call 541-345-8007 or visit [www.vivacegallery.com](http://www.vivacegallery.com).

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Some Sumiche designs

took Sumiche Jewelry to Eugene's Saturday Market, where they sold for nine years.

Sumiche's most well-known product idea originated from clients. The rising anti-gay politics led to an intensified desire for commitment rings, which have become the mainstay of Sumiche Jewelry.

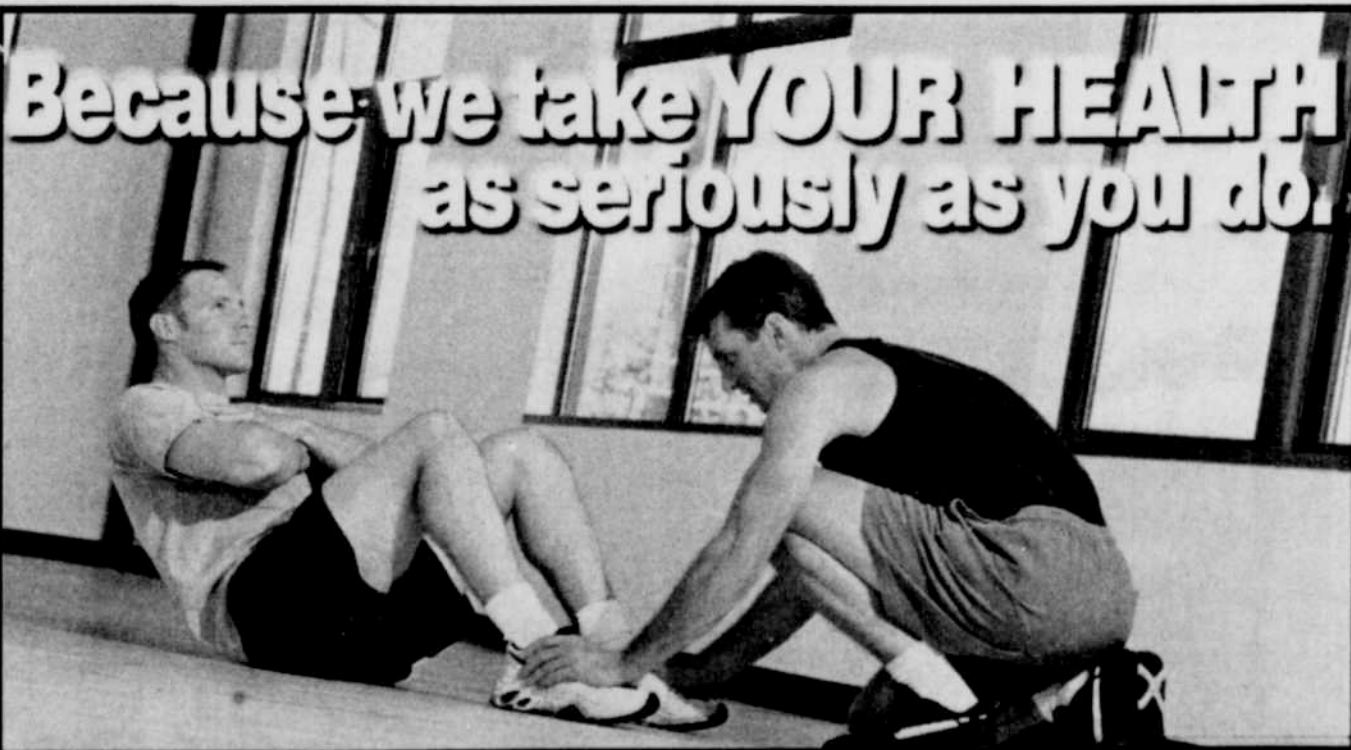
The couple made their first house call in 1989 to a Volkswagen camper in Portland. They sat around a little table designing their first custom ring for a woman's lover.

In Portland their customer base developed partly with the help of Holly Mulcahey, owner of It's My Pleasure, where Sumiche provided on-site design services. "Holly was so supportive," Onaclea remembers. "At the time we were the only nationally out lesbian jewelry makers doing custom work."

Both women note the rewards of working personally with couples and individuals. "We are part of people's lives at an intimate time," Onaclea shares. "When people come to us it is a time when they are really happy. We get a lot of sweet stuff. We've been invited to many ceremonies—some in Hawaii, New Zealand and Costa Rica." During one ceremony they attended, she says,



Vivace Gallery is the only place to find existing Sumiche creations—along with a lot of other neat stuff



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