

Yanase, a life on the bench



(Photo by Dan Klapheke, Illinois Valley News)

Michael Yanase working on a ring at his bench. He and wife Karen have sold commercially since 1994.

By Dan Klapheke
IVN Staff Writer

Jewelry suppliers are scarce in the Valley. It's an intricate trade that takes time, resources and a particular skill set, especially when creating custom pieces. Michael Yanase is one of the few in the Valley who have all that, and he's been putting it to work for over 40 years.

Michael Yanase has been a jeweler since age 20, when he apprenticed in Costa Mesa, California at a jewelry repair and casting shop. He moved to the Valley in 1981 and set up a wholesale workshop in the upstairs room of his parents' house, but even before he moved to the valley he was working repairs for the former Wiggington's and Banyon's jewelry stores in town. Michael said it was a good start, but he realized he was losing money having jewelry stores as middle men.

"We're not gonna get more customers, so what we should get is at least all the money we should get," Michael said.

Michael had the expertise, but lacked skills to also become a certified a gemologist. However, that wasn't his fault; he's colorblind.

"It's possible to be a colorblind gemologist the same way it's possible probably to drive a car if you're almost blind," Michael said. "But not really a good idea and not really effective, and a lot more work to try to pull it off."

That's where his wife Karen comes in. The couple met when Michael worked as a paramedic and Karen took one of his classes. They got married and eventually opened a retail shop in 1994, and Karen studied to receive her certification in gemology.

Together the Yanases make up a complete jeweler team -Michael repairs and creates new pieces, Karen studies stones that come in and together they do pricings and appraisals. Karen's role is important because no matter how much experience Michael has, his word technically means nothing when it comes to appraisals.

"Anybody can appraise, but it has more value with insurance companies and legal standing if it's done by a graduate gemologist," Karen said.

Michael said he learned his craft from "the school of hard-knocks and dirty socks," and his methods haven't changed much from when he started. He hasn't adopted the times of computer-generated casting and molding, and everything he makes he does by hand.

"It will never pay for itself for me to buy 50 to \$100,000 of new equipment," Michael said. "My equipment is fine."

The Yanases don't send any jewelry out--it's all repaired and kept in-shop, secured by an alarm system with barred doors and windows at night.

"Some of this stuff is pretty important to these people, and you have to honor that the best you can," Michael said. "You can't make everybody happy, but I try. I really do try to make everybody happy as I can."

Michael said he considers the store more of an artist's studio. His custom work is on display in the shop, but Michael mainly crafts based on demand and doesn't keep much stock. Customers can visit the store, pick out something they like, then request it be slightly altered or set with a different stone. Michael said that customizability is what makes the Yanase's store unique.

"I'm keenly aware of people's budgetary problems, and I try to position it in a budget they can live with and I can still make some money," Michael said. "I don't try to sell them a Lamborghini if a Hyundai will do the job."

Michael's process starts with the idea. Then he has to decide how to go about it, whether it be through wax casting, which involves carving a design out of wax, or fabricating, which is manipulating and molding metal similar to blacksmithing. Once decided, he gets the parts and goes to work, and has to do so fast.

"You gotta make it happen in a timely manner," Michael said. "People are not really happy if you miss their anniversary."

Yanase Jewelers is located in Kerby on Hwy. 199 and open 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday. Yanase carries diamonds, gold, silver and other stones and metals, as well as estate sale items at discounted prices. Samples of Michael's work are on display throughout the store, as well as photo books of other pieces he's made.

Michael said his and Karen's passion for jewelry is driven by ego and a desire to please their customers. He likes the idea of his work being immortal in a way, but said it doesn't matter if the customer isn't satisfied.

"When I'm long gone, it'd be nice if they go, 'I remember that guy. He treated me fair,'" Michael said. "I would feel great about that. If my customers thought that I gave them a fair shake and that I was honest with them that would be a win for me."

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(Courtesy photo for The Illinois Valley News)

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