

Athens' shining bead

A local bead shop owner allows Athens residents to unlock their creative potential and see the world through “beading.”

Sean Eifert

Jo Merkle shines like a jewel. No, more like a bead. Perhaps a “juicy, juicy tourmalinated quartz bead,” as she describes. Something rarified and transparent, open to interaction.

Merkle has been owner and operator of “Beads and Things,” a store centered around patrons’ creativity. Customers peruse beads in glass jars, with labels that state their origins, anywhere from China to Peru, and their prices, anywhere from a couple cents to a dollar and a half. The money doesn’t really matter to Merkle. “You don’t do this kind of thing for money, you do it because you have a passion,” Merkle said.

A short walk up North Shafer Street reveals a house covered in ivy sitting atop a concrete staircase. With a dark pink exterior and colorful lanterns hanging from the rafters, it looks like something out of a Buddhist barbie doll set. A step inside the house reveals specks of light dancing around the walls from projections of beads of every shape, size and color.

At the work station sits Merkle, with an equally bright smile across her face. Sitting in front of what seems like hundreds of clear glass bowls of metal and glass beads, she’s dressed in a sage green sweater, and jeans, nothing too fancy. That is until you look at her jewelry— sterling silver rings on four out of ten fingers, and a sterling necklace shaped like a bell, wood earrings to complete. Her hair is a silverish blond, flowing down her shoulders, her bangs frame her face.

Tiny oval shaped readers sit on the bridge of her nose, as she looks up from her work every so often.

She runs around the two story house, inspecting and tidying the store where needed. It's controlled chaos. Every inch of the house is filled with color and decor from around the world, which Merkle holds near and dear. Merkle says, "I only buy what I like, because if nobody else likes it, I'm okay with that. I want to be surrounded by things that I like and I like to look at. But I'm not attached to keeping it because there's so much of it."

Merkle started the store in the 90s, with little more than 400 dollars in cash. She said she knew she was going to be in retail ever since she dropped out of college and decided to work for herself. She was an organic gardener for some time in the 1970s. "I knew I was either going to start an organic farmer garden store or a bead store." She chose beads, mainly due to the harsh reality of the grueling manual labor in organic farming.

Even though she left farming, her regard for beads is deep rooted in her love of nature. When they're in Athens, Merkle and her husband and business partner, Phil Berry, live together in a cabin in the country. Her eyes light up when she talks about the outdoors. "The carvers in Mexico are outside, the glass makers in Bali they're outside."

She says her regard for "beading" started when she was a child. "My mom was an art teacher and for one of the projects we had to make beaded moccasins. I don't think I ever finished my moccasins, but I made a lot of necklaces. After that I just totally fell in love with beads." That

passion has turned into what she calls a lifestyle, as the money from the store funds world travel, which allows them to bring more beads to the store.

She's ventured to Peru, China, West Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the Czech Republic, Mexico, and more accompanied by her husband. "Normally it's gonna be places we can afford to buy (the beads). We don't go to Venice, those beads are really expensive," she said. The pair have been traveling for 40 years, but Merkle still remarks they need to take another adventure.

They both express that it's impossible to pinpoint one particular location that stands out from the rest. Merkle's husband lists off remarkable adventures, but after 40 years of travel, it seems they've seen it all. "When we're out West in the winter, we'll go to Tijuana. There's a little art market we like to go to buy stained-glass stuff," Berry said. "Peru is another real high point and a place we'd like to get back to. Just spending some time in the sacred valley there— Machu Picchu. China was great. The Chinese are always changing the rules for how you can travel to Tibet. We got a little window of opportunity where Jo and I could be our own tour group." Every nook of the world seems to have some place in the couple's store.

"Phil keeps me going. I mean if we're together we can accomplish anything," Merkle says. The two bounce around the store, making quick remarks at the other's expense. "Hey Merkle," Berry says, to which Merkle replies, "Hey, Berry," as she races out into the cool morning air to check the front lawn, which someone has let their dog poop on. "I make a good partner. I don't need to be top dog in this, but he may disagree with that," She said, chuckling. She paces through the

store, sifting through drawers in the workstation. When Merkle sits down, Berry pops up and picks up where she left off.

On a particularly busy Thursday morning, one of three days the store is open during the week, Merkle helps three older women make necklaces and earrings for their loved ones. Susan Sharpe, who's been coming to the store since before the pandemic, shares experiences traveling to Yucatan. Jo bonds with her over traveling. Sharpe motions to a shelf and says, "The alebrijes there, we went down to Oaxaca in Mexico and brought back similar things. They go to the same places. They go to the rock, gem and mineral show in Tucson and we've been there too." Sharpe, a retired lawyer, says that coming to the bead store unlocked creativity through her relationship with Merkle. She says that Merkle's ability to share where beads come from is something special. "She's an inspiration," Sharpe says.

The store is a collection of relationships from around the world. Selecting a sand-cast bead from Africa sparks a conversation about the artisans' practice of smashing the beads with their car tires. Or in Sharpe's case, how an \$1,100 necklace came from a tomb in Afghanistan. Merkle says each bead represents a family, and in that way she gets to share their stories with people that come into her store. Berry says, "Being able to do a little bit of that co-creation kind of thing has been really important to both of us."