

Leading a Balanced Life

Keith Berge, M.D.



Keith Berge at his work bench.

To the astonishment of friends and family, and to my utter amazement, I have become a goldsmith. I've been asked to tell the why and how of this evolution, which runs the risk of portraying this happening as an orderly and planned series of events which led inevitably to a predetermined outcome. This is anything but the case.

The most frequent question I receive is "How did you get started?" In response, I offer a short version or a long version. I'll start you off with the short one, which is "by using books and videotapes." In this internet era, where it seems all information worth having can be found by a Google search, let me assure you that you would be simply amazed at what can be found in books. With a craft as old and relatively unchanging as metal-smithing, useful information can be found in books that are literally hundreds of years old, as there is little that is new in this craft. One very notable exception to this is the fabulous tool provided by video technology as applied to teaching. I learned enough to make a very good start by this method. When, years later, I finally met the Master that had written the books and made the videotapes, Alan Revere, my first words to him were, "We've never met, but you've taught me everything I know about

goldsmithing." It must have been the right thing to say, as in the years since that meeting we have become good friends. It was not idle flattery, however, but a statement of fact. Actually being able to see an expert perform a task, with the ability to rewind and review until you have mastered the task, provides value beyond measure. This same holds true for almost any physical task one wishes to learn, from goldsmithing to fly-casting to playing an instrument to cooking. Books are wonderful, but videos are beyond wonderful.

The long version of the answer best starts with a "why," as in why did I go down this path in the first place? Basically, I was looking for another mountain to climb. Perhaps as a result of being conditioned to expect a "career change" every several years after leaving elementary school as a result of changes in educational settings, goals, and expectations, I became restless after getting settled into my career track in my "day job." Several years earlier, my wife and daughter had begun making simple jewelry as a hobby. As people saw what they made, requests came to buy their work. From this small beginning grew "Styles by Johanna," which has now become my wife's full-time job. As the business grew, and her needs for different beads grew, she asked me out of the blue, "can you make me high-karat gold beads?" Of course, as I knew absolutely nothing about even how to begin such a project, I said "sure." Why on Earth I would say such a thing is still not clear to me, but in retrospect that was a major fork in the road of my life which has carried me off on a wonderful journey. Thereafter I actively sought the knowledge I needed to create what she desired by the methods outlined above. One of the projects in Alan Revere's book was to make a chain, which I did. I enjoyed the process, and made several more in different variations. This, again, was to lead to a fork in the road.

After some time passed, and my shop and skills grew, Johanna and I visited Santa Fe, New Mexico, which we had heard is a custom jewelry and high karat gold Mecca. It is indeed, and when a gallery owner saw Johanna's chains and asked if I would consign them through his gallery, well, another fork . . . Incidentally, for those who have come to our Fall Open Houses and met the Santa Fe cowboy (Doug Moore) there, he was the gallery owner that gave me my break into the big leagues.



Replica 22 karat gold Etruscan two-way double loop-in-loop bracelet with cabochon ruby, emerald, and sapphire.



A gold ring with a center mounted diamond. Keith Berge was commissioned to make this ring by the life partner of an ICU patient of Keith's who died. The life partner had the diamond created from the remains of this deceased person.

As it became clear that I needed to expand my skill set, I began traveling to Alan Revere's school in San Francisco for classes as time allowed. By this I have had the opportunity to meet some amazingly talented, creative, and delightful people. To say that they tend to march to different drummers than my medical friends understates things by a large margin! I found, however, that I shared a deeper common bond with some of these artists than simply jewelry creation, and that is a love of history. Nearly all of my favorite teachers have the deepest respect for those who came before in this craft, going all the way back to the amazing craftsmen of the Sumerian, Minoan, Etruscan, Greek, Roman, and Thracian cultures, to name but a few. Out of this interest has grown the style of jewelry I have adopted as my own, the creation of replicas or interpretations of works of these ancient craftsmen. It is humbling to be working with vastly superior tools to what they had to work with (e.g. charcoal and blowpipes, no magnification) and yet be unable to begin to match their amazing skills. That said, in an era where machine mass-production is the norm,

it is personally gratifying to hand-craft pieces similar to those seen inside display cases in the great museums of the world. I've been able to pay for my materials and my classes, plus gradually acquire a supply of marvelous tools, by way of selling my work through several galleries in such places as Santa Fe, New Mexico; Jackson, Wyoming; and Vail, Colorado.

I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the debt of gratitude I owe to several of my colleagues in the evolution of my skills as a goldsmith. First is Niki Dietz, who early on understood what I was trying to do and became my earliest customer. I credit her with giving me the courage to believe in my skill and to push it farther. She is proud to wear some of my early, rather crude, items that I desperately wish I could get back and bring "up to code." Another influential friend is Terre Horlocker, who is a serious fan of all things ancient. Terre has brought me the most challenging tasks to complete and has never allowed me to get away with telling her that I have not the slightest idea how to accomplish her design idea. Her stock response is, "I know you'll figure it out, no hurry." These two muses have pushed me in ways I have been grateful to have been pushed, if sometimes only in retrospect.

To conclude, I would encourage all of you, when you come to a fork in the road, to take the one that offers the challenge. People have told me how lucky I am to have found a passion outside of medicine that I can pursue for the rest of my life. Yes, there was an element of luck, but there was also a relentless lifelong quest to find ways to amuse myself. So my advice to all of you is to try stuff. You are good with your hands, or you wouldn't be doing what we do. Don't be tied to such thoughts as "I have no artistic ability." Neither did we, at least not until we tried. By virtue of some decisions that seemed strange at the time, we have been brought to a wonderful new place, with wonderful new friends and adventures to compliment the great friends and adventures we already enjoyed.

Oh, and Johanna is still waiting for me to make her beads . . .