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THIRTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

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THE PATH FROM NOTHING TO SOMETHING

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BEADS, CRYSTALS & MORE

by Jill A. DeDominicis



STRANDS OF BEADS: large Spanish Nueva Cadiz and sterling silver necklace; collector's strand of ancient Roman-era eye beads, circa 100 B.C.; large, rare Majapahit (Jatim) bead, circa 1300 A.D.; and Venetian trade beads.

Above right, from bottom row: two strands of collectible African Kiffa beads from Mauritania; 1800s pink pineapple beads; Venetian lamp-work beads.

Phil Fischman had no idea that making a pair of earrings for his wife Valeri Okun would change the course of both of their lives. Just as he was finishing the last pair in a collection of forty-three pairs of earrings for Okun's forty-third birthday, Fischman found he had completely run out of headpins. The following day he walked to the local bead store in their Encinitas, California, neighborhood to replenish his stock, and fate stepped in. Fischman found the store half empty and ready to close its doors. On a leap of faith, he and Okun put their savings into buying the store. They called it Beads, Crystals & More, and from that moment they found their vision and passion.

It was an unexpected turn of events, but not completely without precedent. Fischman, a self-described "rock hound" since the age of seven (which led to certification as a Graduate Gemologist and a Senior Charter Member of the National Association of Gem and Jewelry Appraisers), developed a love for beads early on. He discovered his first bead store in the late 1960s, when ornamentation as a means of personal expression was becoming more mainstream. Later, he relocated to the Tucson valley and found a job in a bead store that also carried Native American items. As his cultural and historical awareness grew, and he watched African bead traders negotiate with the store manager, some little blue chevron beads captured his imagination. "For some reason the chevron beads opened up my little mind when I was seventeen or eighteen," Fischman remembers, "and then the history never stopped." He began his personal collection of beads and became enraptured by bead studies and histories.

In the eleven years since purchasing the store, Fischman and Okun have amassed an impressive selection of beads, mineral and crystal specimens, findings, precious and non-precious metals, and other supplies. "Our philosophy early on was one of joyful abundance," Fischman states. Also part of their philosophy was that ordinary could be found anywhere; they were interested in offering customers the special and unusual. Their collection of semiprecious stones and trade beads demonstrates this intention. When buying, Fischman takes ultimate care in seeking out unique items, and focuses on finding full strands of special beads, or pairs and groups of unique specimens when he can. "To me it's a really sacred and special responsibility buying and bringing these things in," he says. "I don't care if it's plastic or a shell, I won't buy anything if I wouldn't feel good about making something for Valeri or my mom and dad and giving it to them. I still operate from the



Left: Portion of the large BEADS, CRYSTALS & MORE store.

Below: PHIL FISCHMAN with a selection of the store's inventory of gemstones, trade beads and other bead strands.

Bottom: BEAD MANDALA of large moon glass/opaline bead; Ghanian powder-glass bodom bead; Venetian feather, white heart, millifiore, chevron and murrini glass beads; replica Phoenician face pendant.

same center I operated from all those years ago, even though we have a business. To me it's still that personal, and when people come in here, they feel that, they get that connection."

Beads, Crystals & More is a business centered on bead and jewelry supplies, but also one based on relationships. Their customers vary from people who bead for a living, to healers in the local community who appreciate their selection of minerals and crystals, to those who simply want to have fun. No matter what the interest, Fischman, Okun and their small staff take pleasure in helping their customers find exactly what they need, and in educating their customers about the greater history of beads. "There's the bead experience and then there's the human experience," Fischman notes. "So here we are talking about humanity on a day-to-day basis. I love how multicultural it is. I love that we have from six-year-olds to ninety-six-year-olds come in and have their mind and hearts open." Okun, who has a background in clinical psychology, agrees. "Here I'm healing on a different level. It's about enjoying company, and listening and paying attention because you can hear real clearly where people are coming from and how to best take care of their needs."

Those who are interested in the history and heritage of beads and other artifacts will find breathtaking treasures in the rear room. Originally intended as a room to conduct buying and selling, the space instead became a sort of mini-museum for some of the rare pieces in the store's collection. From Native American medicine bags, to old agate and Islamic glass beads, to Tibetan treasures, the museum room is another level of Fischman and Okun's dedication to the bead legacy. "It may not put money in our pocket, but it enriches everybody's experience," Fischman says. "That's what the backroom is about—the philosophy of sharing the history and timelessness. I've done this for forty years and I've never had more fun. It's never been more interesting than it is now because we have more beads, more stories, more access to more parts of the world."

Their newly developed website, currently in the works, will serve as an extension of the store itself, but will also be, as Fischman says, "an opportunity to connect with people around the world and country, customers who can't come to the store for one reason or another. My alter ego has become Johnny Applebead, so it's about the ability to share, to plant little seeds." Through their store and new website, Beads, Crystals & More can continue to make personal connections, to share the beauty, stories and histories, one bead at a time. ☺



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