

# HOW TWO ARTISTS STARTED A JEWELRY SCHOOL, STUDIO AND GALLERY

**K**aren Christians and Jennifer "Jeff" Bowie are jewelry artists with an ambitious agenda: to make jewelry, make money making jewelry, offer their community the opportunity to learn how to make jewelry and offer other jewelry artists a gallery in which to show and sell their work. Less than two years out of art school, the pair's ambitions are becoming a reality.

Their school, studio and gallery, Metalwerx, opened in Woburn, Mass., in 1998 and already has almost full enrollment. Their gallery is growing. And through careful planning and management, the jewelry duo still has time for their own jewelry work.

## THE BEGINNING

Christians' interest in jewelry began at an early age. "The Smithsonian's Natural History museum always fascinated me ... the jewelry was great, and it put the mineral aspect into a wearable context," she says.

However, it wasn't until she was in her mid-30s that she began making jewelry. When she made her first band ring at The Cambridge Center for Adult Education (CCAЕ) in 1987, she says she "was hooked on the heat alchemy. Having this 'fire thing' that made jewelry to wear was the ultimate high." She was, as she describes it, "transformed!"

After taking classes for four and a half years at CCAЕ and the De Cordova Museum, Christians enrolled in the Massachusetts College of Art (MCA), eventually earning her bachelor of fine arts degree in metalsmithing in 1997.

Jennifer Bowie's family, like many artists' families, had encouraged her to pursue a career through which she could "earn a living," so she worked toward a bachelor's degree in art history from the University of Rochester, and graduated in 1991 with plans to become a curator, librarian or conservator.

But metalwork was already in the back of her mind. Her undergraduate studies had included a six-month internship with the Keeper of Armour at the Tower of London.



(Above) Jennifer Bowie (middle) works with Jody Baker at Metalwerx.

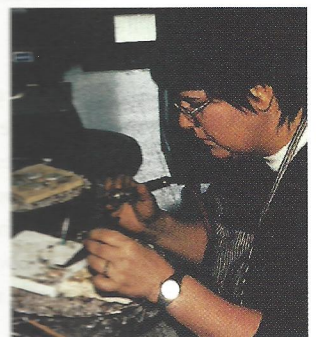
She spent months organizing the catalogue system, polishing Spanish helmets, counting pikes and stray pieces of horse armour, and stamping little aluminum numbered disks that were wired to the armour for identification. It was through this intense, tactile experience that metal "got under under [her] skin," she says.

After she graduated, she moved to Boston, took a job as a corporate secretary and eventually began to take classes at CCAЕ with Ellen Weiske, the teacher who soon encouraged her to enroll in art school. After four years of increasing frustration with her corporate job, Bowie applied to MCA, where she earned her bachelor of fine arts degree in metalsmithing in 1998, and where she met Karen Christians.

## AN IDEA WAS BORN

After graduating, Christians and Bowie had both set up small studios in their homes. Christians, while teaching jewelry making at CCAЕ, noticed that her classes were always filled, with additional artists on a long waiting list. Since college is expensive, and adult edu-

(Below) Karen Christians still finds time for her own work.





cation programs are often poorly equipped, both artists saw a need for a different learning environment.

In 1998, they both attended the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG) Conference in Seattle, Wash., and, through networking with other jewelry artists, found the inspiration they needed to begin establishing a studio and school.

At CCAE, Christians had initiated the concept of "Studio Saturdays," open studio time for supervised students to work uninterrupted for several hours using the school's equipment and tools. Seeing the popularity of this concept, she and Bowie decided to incorporate it into plans for their school/studio, Metalwerx, as "Community Open Studios."

#### **COMMONALTY OF PURPOSE DEFINED**

The leap from conception to actualization was enormous, but Christians and Bowie prepared themselves well. They were clear with each other from the outset about how they wanted the enterprise to look. They sought and encouraged feedback from others, resulting in a wealth of suggestions that helped clarify their ideas for the structure of the business. Christians' teaching experience added an understanding of studio and student requirements.

Still, realizing this was a daring path for recent graduates, Bowie and Christians sought professional business advice.

Christians first learned how to write a business plan from a friend who writes business plans for a living. She also practiced talking to an imaginary investor, including writing out detailed answers to potential questions. This helped define their goals even further.

Their background has also helped with the business aspects of their plan. Before attending MCA, Christians and Bowie were employed as secretaries: Christians at Harvard University, running an eight-person laboratory and organizing research grants; and Bowie at the private corporate level. This training — in management, business processes and even customer service — was essential when they began to plan their school.

Still, setting up their own business was

definitely a daily learning experience. They quickly learned three important directives in planning a business partnership:

1. Talk everything out very clearly and very honestly with your partner. Trust your partner implicitly and be available to your partner on a regular basis;
2. Find a good lawyer who has your interests in mind and explains all the details;
3. Find a good tax accountant.

Christians feels that, although these may be "mundane" elements of running an art school, studio and gallery, the result of their preparation is that Metalwerx has been organized as an LLC (limited liability company), which provides personal asset protection in case of bankruptcy or in the event of a tragedy. It also gives the company the opportunity to franchise, where a limited liability partnership does not.

#### **LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION ...**

Again, forethought helped determine the best location for their new enterprise. Realizing that many people were moving away from Boston and into the suburbs for a more relaxed lifestyle, these savvy jewelers decided to locate Metalwerx in the low-rent, free-parking town of Woburn. Rather than locating where the arts were plentiful, they chose to set up in an art-starved community. Bowie states, "It's easy to make art in a place where it's cool to be artsy. It requires a little more determination to bring art to a place full of nail salons and pizza joints."

They expected to reach local students easily, but they were concerned about attracting students from afar. Fortunately, they found that their programs have convinced students to come from up to 70 miles away and, even before the doors opened, two workshops in stone setting and basic wire working and a 10-week beginning jewelry class filled up.

#### **A FINANCIAL SAFETY NET**

Starting any storefront business requires start-up dollars. Christians and Bowie were lucky enough to secure a \$15,000 gift from a fellow artist who had always wanted to help another artist get a start. Christians says, "Sometimes you just need a helping hand

and trust. My goal is to repay her in full, not that she expects it, but if that money could help somebody else realize their dream, all the better."

Between Christians and Bowie, they had enough tools and equipment to allow them to set up the studio and operate the school. The \$15,000 was used to pay for a sign over the front window, a ventilation system, the telephone, a credit card machine, jewelry cases, advertising, legal and accounting fees, office equipment, additional metal equipment, a Web site domain, etc. They had no other investors or loans. They used personal money to cover rent from July to December. By January 1999, Metalwerx became a self-sustaining enterprise.

The gallery was the last component of the business to evolve. The space has two beautiful front windows facing the street. It occurred to them that if they filled the windows with jewelry, it would bring in foot traffic.

Furnishing the gallery was easier than they thought. When they began looking for some inexpensive display cases to house the jewelry, they discovered a high-end jewelry store next to them was closing. They bought two glass cases for \$100 each and painted them themselves.

They exhibit their own jewelry in the gallery, along with the work of 12 other jewelry artists. The artists receive 60 percent commission. One exhibition will be held each year. This year's exhibition, "Tea Time," is currently on exhibit. To announce the exhibitions, as well as upcoming classes and workshops, Metalwerx sends out a quarterly newsletter to students and customers, as well as utilizes its Web site.

#### **LOGISTICS OF TIME**

They devote themselves to the many aspects of the business but still are able to pursue their own art. Tuesdays are dedicated to running the business — paying bills, paying artists' commissions, doing the books, etc. Afternoons are devoted to teaching classes.

At first they thought Metalwerx would be a big drain on their creative time, but instead the experience fosters their



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creativity. They have both experienced working in isolation in their own studios, using the tools and equipment they could afford to purchase. Having pooled their resources and equipment, they are now accessible to each other for dialogue and critique, and they work in a clean, well-lit, well-appointed studio with efficient ventilation.

Jewelry-making is a physically demanding job, putting strain on the neck, shoulders, elbows and eyes, and not allowing for much exercise throughout the day. They make sure that they take care of themselves by exercising each morning at the YMCA and by taking time off to be with their families. They have also purchased new benches for the studio which are at a good working height to prevent strain.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

Most important to their success thus far, Christians says, was determination. "We had no fear and were willing to take a risk." They knew that this was the right thing to do, and their gallery sales and school enrollment prove that they were not mistaken. As of their fourth month of operation, they have run all the workshops offered and two full ten-week classes.

Although both artists have invested in an enterprise that seems to be everything they had originally planned, their goal is to move to a larger space in about two years, expanding the

studio to include at least 12 benches (they currently have space for six students) and all the equipment necessary for a more complete studio.

Christians and Bowie have achieved their original goal: Students who enroll in Metalwerx classes are afforded a solid, reasonably priced entree into metalsmithing/jewelry making. As a result of their vision, persistence and hard work, they can continue to make their art, while helping others begin to walk the same path they have traveled.

Christians feels that if they could have their way, "Metalwerx would be in every city, [with] at least one in Providence, R.I., and one in Boston in the next five years." For these two artful entrepreneurs with their ambitious agenda, that may not be just a flight of fancy. **TCR**

Linda Kaye-Moses is a Pittsfield, Mass.-based freelance writer and metalsmith who owns Plumdinger Studio.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

##### Cambridge Center for Adult Education

42 Brattle St.  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
(617) 547-6789

##### Massachusetts College of Art

Professor Joe Wood  
621 Huntington Ave.  
Boston, MA 02115  
(617) 232-1555 (main number)  
Web site: [www.massart.edu/](http://www.massart.edu/)

##### Metalwerx

416 Main St.  
Woburn, MA 01801  
(781) 937-3532  
Karen Christian's and Jennifer Bowie's art can also be seen at:

- The Barret Gallery in Portsmouth, N.H., and
- Intrinsic Design in Dover, N.H. Christian's work can also be seen on the Web at [www.ganoksin.com/orchid/gallery.htm](http://www.ganoksin.com/orchid/gallery.htm).

##### The Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG)

Business Office  
710 East Ogden Ave.,  
Ste. 600  
Naperville, IL 60563-8603  
(630) 579-3272  
Fax: (630) 369-2488