

Jason: Today we're talking to Valerie Madison. Tell me, what do you love about jewelry Valerie?

Valerie: Oh, there's so much I love about jewelry, but I think what stands out most for me is the ability to artistically express yourself with metals and gemstones. And it's just so unique and individual to each person.

Jason: Tell me more about that.

Valerie: Well, if you're trying to think about your personal style, a great way to show the world, before you even speak really, you can leave a really great impression with the type of jewelry you choose to adorn yourself with. So, if you're wearing a loud statement ring, it shows people that you might be bold or really admire a specific color of gemstone. If you're more subtle, it might match your quiet style preferences. So, I think it says a lot about you, the way that you choose to dress yourself with jewelry.

Jason: That's incredible. Why did you become a jewelry designer?

Valerie: Well, I'm not formally trained, but I have a really great eye that I came to appreciate more as this career rooted itself for me. I think that jewelry design is really important because unlike traditional jewelry making, there's a lot of thought and intention that goes into understanding the functionality of pieces. Not only should it look really good, but it should feel comfortable and be able to stand the test of time. It's my hope that the jewelry I create looks beautiful, functions great, and can be a piece that is passed down to future generations.

Jason: You know, I'm curious. What makes jewelry heirloom to you?

Valerie: I think what makes jewelry heirloom is the artisanship, how it's made is really important, how sturdy it is. And then I also pay attention to trends, but more important to me is timelessness. So, silhouettes that are going to look and feel good now. They should feel and look the same way in thirty, forty, sixty years, even more. They're going to age, obviously, but I still want them to be in good shape, and that means constructing them well. I always encourage my clients to think about when they're considering this investment, it's not just for them in that moment, it's for their future as well and the legacy they want to leave behind.

Jason: That's neat. What's your specialty?

Valerie: We're able to offer really great customer service first. We enjoy being able to support customers on their endeavors to have something sentimentally represent either their love, their union with a partner, or a specific milestone that has happened. Maybe they just got their PhD, or they left a toxic relationship, or maybe they had a baby. So, we're thinking about ways to help customers commemorate really special moments. And we do that just by trying to hold your hand throughout the process and offering insight into what makes a good gemstone choice, offering the best that we can source from. And just creating a really beautiful ring.

Jason: Tell me more about your custom process.

Valerie: So, our custom process has started and remained the same because it works well for us. We invite customers to reach out to us and let us know what they're looking for. We offer more of a semi-custom approach. So, we have designs, several—right now we do customs for engagement rings only. In the future we may expand. But we have specific settings that we offer, and I design them because I'm trying to make sure I cover all the bases with certain types of settings, whether they're modern or vintage or bezels or three-stone. And so, customers will approach us and say, "I'm looking for a three-stone ring. I really like your Zara setting," which is our three-stone setting. And they might want to customize the center stone with a teal sapphire or Cadillac diamond side stones. We help the customers by offering a search through our own inventory of what we already carry. We source beautiful gemstones as we see them. Or if we don't have it, we're happy to work with customers and find the perfect stone for them.

Jason: Thanks for explaining that. Everybody's custom experience is a little different, and it's really neat to see how you do yours. From your client's perspective, how many of them actually choose to customize?

Valerie: I create a lot of rings, a lot of one-of-a-kind rings that are made to go and they are "off the shelf." But they are one-of-a-kind. So, there are no other rings exactly like it. And that's part of our appeal—we don't often repeat, because gemstones are so unique and Mother Nature only makes one of each sapphire, which we particularly specialize in. And some diamonds. So, we find that some customers are looking for a really specialized experience to help them find something superunique that no one else has. We stock some pieces so if they're in a time crunch, they can select one of those. Or they can select the route of finding something custom. I'd say it's probably about 50/50, it just depends on their own personal circumstances.

Jason: And for people thinking about what it's like to actually come inside your store, can you describe it for me?

Valerie: We began building it last year. I signed the lease for February 2020. And then 2020 happened and it took a very long time, but we finally did get it open at the end of September. We aim to be a representation of what we present online and for our Instagram. The space itself, we try to have it be an elevated, elegant, serene transition from the website to a physical presence. When you walk in, there's a lot of clean lines, cases that are beautifully filled with jewelry. Come May, we'll have a slightly more enhanced layout.

Jason: What is that gonna look like?

Valerie: Well, it's just larger. We're investing in more surfaces and more cases and ready to offer a lot more jewelry to choose from so they can walk away with it.

Jason: What are some of those popular items that you're gonna be putting into the showcase?

Valerie: Well, we carry a lot of engagement rings. But also a lot of fine jewelry that can be worn for occasions outside of bridal. So, we have every category. But we'd like to see if we can delve into more masculine jewelry as well, because we certainly cater to more feminine bridal styles. Our store is very small, it's a little jewelry box. We have this wonderful neighborhood we're situated in and there's a lot of residents here who love jewelry. And so, they might want something just to have something nice, and not necessarily wedding-related.

Jason: Yeah, tell me about this location and what makes it special in the area?

Valerie: We are in the very charming neighborhood of Madrona, which is just east of Seattle. It is tucked away on a big hill. The neighborhood is older. It's certainly quiet. It's a quiet neighborhood that we enjoy being in. We feel a sense of community here. And it's a little bit of a destination for our customers who like to visit us. You can make a weekend of it—just come visit us, visit our neighbors for brunch. There's coffee, cupcakes, ice cream, there's a few clothing locations, a few restaurants.

Jason: When people come in, is there an item where you're like, "This is our most popular item" outside of engagement rings?

Valerie: We have our cases arranged where you can view engagement rings, but if you're not at all interested or if you're not in that part of your life's stage, we have some entry-level fine jewelry. So, let's say you just graduated college, you just got your first official job, and you want to celebrate and get yourself your first real gold necklace. We can help you with a few styles related to that. Everyone is so different, stylistically and individually, their preferences. Diamonds are a classic, but we definitely specialize in alternative styles. And alternative to me represents, for us it's vibrant gemstones, which are mainly sapphires. Here in the Pacific Northwest, teal sapphires really resonate with our customers, and we do a great job of sourcing beautiful teal sapphires from Australia, Montana sapphires. We got some really great peach sapphires as well.

Jason: Now if you had an opportunity to dress a famous person, alive or from the past, who would it be and why?

Valerie: Michelle Obama is the first person who comes to mind. She's so intelligent and so savvy and she represents strength. And I think getting my jewelry on her would be really wonderful because it'd feel like my jewelry represents that as well, which is the direction I always try to head.

Jason: Amazing, amazing. And we love to tell stories, specifically around love stories from our jewelers. It can be an engagement ring story, it can be a romantic customer story that you had. Can you share one?

Valerie: We have hundreds of them. One of the first ones that comes to mind is from a good friend actually. My friends Anna and Jeff, they live in British Columbia, in Vancouver. And they

were one of my first engagement ring proposals. I designed a custom ring for her that I couldn't see anywhere else. And I sourced emeralds and Canadian diamonds, because they were in Canada and I thought that was a really special touch. And it was a really awakening experience because it made me love the custom process because these customers were ideal, not only in that I enjoyed them as people, but they were really easy to work with. And it was a complete surprise for my friend Anna. I really loved the whole process from start to finish, sketching it out, designing a new CAD, presenting that, getting the go-ahead, casting it in recycled white gold, and then seeing the photos from the proposal, this beautiful national park where the water was just this beautiful, like sediment blue glacial water. And it was this picturesque engagement that I really enjoyed seeing. From start to finish, I was able to see how a ring that I created really made her happy and represented a special moment for her. And it was nice to be a small part of that story. And because she's a friend, I do get to see the ring from time to time, and seeing the ring reminds me of how much I enjoy the custom process. It makes me really proud. Especially because she's had it for a few years now and it's still strong and that's exactly what I anticipated for all my rings. So, I get to visit it and give it cleanings when necessary. And I know that for our customers now, we may have expanded, and I may not be able to work with all our customers now because our volume is so much more. I have extended the same practices and taught the same, my staff has the same beliefs. So right now, all our custom order sales associates treat everyone with such kindness and such care. And that's really important to me, that they reflect the same values I have so that I know my customers are well taken care of.

Jason: Jewelry is such a trust business. And what does trust mean to you?

Valerie: Trust would mean assuming that only great things are going to happen. Not having to prepare for the worst. Being amazed, and not surprised that you're amazed with the quality of how it looks. We work really hard, and we have a high bar for the gemstones that we source. We make sure we are sourcing the very best that we can so that the customer has a great overall impression of the ring, and as the ring continues to age, the ring is still strong and beautiful and never has any issues. Jewelry has become a really big part of my life. I didn't grow up with jewelry, I had no exposure to it. My family was really poor, so I never saw gold or diamonds or gemstones. And I found myself in this industry because it started as a hobby and I saw that my customers were giving me such positive feedback and helping me see that I could take it further. I definitely found myself hitting some walls as someone not having any connections in the industry or just any exposure. There were not any entrepreneurs or business owners I was exposed to. I just had to learn so much. But I was so passionate about it and I loved crafting these individual pieces of artwork that we get to wear on a daily basis. I found ways to make sense of it all and connect with vendors and meet the right people. I was very motivated, very—I have a lot of impulsivity sometimes. The day I became self-employed, I got a tattoo on my arm, on my wrist that I could see every day. And it's of the, if you were familiar with the Periodic Table of Elements, it's essentially the Gold—

Jason: That's amazing.

Valerie: —symbol on my wrist. And I designed it to be a very beautiful representation of that, so

it's not science-y. But I look at it every day, and it was my way of committing to this, to remind me that I have no other choice. I'm in it to win it.

Jason: And when you think about your store, your location, your community, can you tell me about some of the involvement in charities and community programs that you and your team brings to the table?

Valerie: So, we're still feeling new in our particular neighborhood, so 2020 was a little tricky in terms of trying to meet with people and learn who's who and who we can support with charity actions. It's been kind of slow in terms of going in that direction. Recently I had a really great experience speaking at my alma mater, which is University of Washington. And I helped with the School of Business on a particular panel, which was aimed at guiding young business owners, mentoring them and helping them answer a lot of the questions they were having, because I too have been in those shoes. And it really revealed that I'm really interested in helping other small businesses, particularly young businesses that are just starting out. So, I actually have some plans to make that mentorship program something that we spearhead here in my company because I feel I have a lot to offer. I know that starting a small business is not easy. So, you have that determination, willpower, and ability to find answers to questions on your own. You have to have that independence, because if you can't find answers yourself—no one's gonna hold your hand the whole time. So that's something I'm gonna try, just figuring out with COVID how to initiate that.

Jason: That's fantastic. That's fantastic that you're giving back to your alma mater. Congratulations on all your successes Valerie.

Valerie: Thank you for having me.