

BEVERLY HILLS *Jewellers*



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Paying it forward

By Jacquie De Almeida

The jewellery department at Beverly Hills Jewellers looks like that of any other manufacturing operation.

Rows of benches line either side of the room, while flex shafts and other tools of the trade lie within easy reach of the jewellers creating its bridal and fashion lines. This is likely where the similarities end, given the baby jumper suspended from the ceiling.

Photo by Jacquie De Almeida



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[Top] 14-karat white gold ring, with princess-cut Canadian centre diamond (1.00 ctw) and Canadian diamonds (.60 ctw) on the shank. [Bottom] 14-karat white gold band with Canadian diamonds (.66 ctw).

19-karat white gold ring, with Canadian round centre diamond (.30 ctw) and diamonds (.70 ctw).



Photos courtesy Beverly Hills Jewellers

Owner Giovanni Vaccaro shakes his head ‘No,’ when asked if he allows his employees to bring their tots to work. He says the jumper was installed years ago, when his brother’s children were infants. They’re grown up now, but the harness remains.

“This business was founded on family values and for me, the baby jumper is a symbol of family here—that we’re not just one person, we’re a family,” says Vaccaro of the business located in Richmond Hill, Ont. “This is one thing I will never remove from the premises.”

Learning the ropes

Though of Italian descent, Vaccaro was born in France and moved to Canada with his family when he was barely four years old. Although his father initially worked in forestry, an accident forced him to give up his job. Refusing to go on welfare, he entered a government program that taught applicants skills in a new field. “For whatever reason, my dad chose jewellery polishing,” Vaccaro says. In fact, both his parents became polishers.

By the age of eight, Vaccaro had joined his dad at the bench, learning to polish. And although he enjoyed it, he had his heart set on being a cop. At 19, he applied to what was then the Metropolitan Toronto Police. Unable to meet the eyesight requirements, Vaccaro considered working as a polisher, but ultimately decided to become a diamond setter. After attending George Brown College, he got an apprenticeship at A & A Jewellers, where he honed his skills.

Ten years later, Vaccaro and his brother, Cosmo, felt it was time to get into the manufacturing game themselves. “But our parents didn’t think it was a good idea,” Vaccaro recalls. “They said that before we could become manufacturers, we had to understand what a retailer goes through.”

The brothers soon opened the doors to a store in Richmond Hill, offering a couple of watch brands and generic staples, such as Italian chains. Most of the work, however, was in custom design jewellery, which gave them a taste of what the future would hold.

“We did not like selling, but we loved manufacturing and were really good at it,” Vaccaro says.

Seventeen years later, Cosmo decided it was time the two start up their own manufacturing company. “My brother was younger, but he was the visionary. He was someone that believed whatever he did today was for tomorrow. One day, he said, ‘I’m going into manufacturing. Are you with me or not?’ I looked at him and said, ‘Okay.’ He said, ‘Good. Now you tell Mom.’ We always respected our parents and didn’t want to disappoint them.”

That was in 1999. With their parents’ blessing, the brothers opened the doors to Beverly Hills Jewellers. Cosmo oversaw the manufacturing end of the business, while Vaccaro handled sales and setting stones. In the evenings, he made the wood trays in which their jewellery was displayed. For every order that came in, both the jewellery and the trays, staining and all, had to be ready by the next morning.



◀◀ 10-karat white gold ring set with pink pearl.

“We felt very strongly about making our own trays because it set us apart from others. If you buy a display from another supplier and put your product in it, you’re not recognized,” says Vaccaro.

In 2006, Cosmo passed away from meningitis. Vaccaro not only lost his brother, but his business partner. Coming back from that took a long time, he admits.

“It was very difficult for about eight months after I lost my brother,” Vaccaro says. “I knew if I did not start to focus where I needed to, this company would have not continued and that’s something my brother and I promised each other. We said we wanted it for our children. That was very important.”

Today, Vaccaro leads a team of more than 70 bench jewellers, casters, setters, polishers, and diamond engravers and a company with 1000 retailers across Canada.

Canadian-made, Canadian pride

As one of the few jewellery manufacturers in the Great White North, Beverly Hills Jewellers promotes all things Canadian, including the use of homegrown diamonds and gold. The company’s proprietary diamond brand carries the trademarked slogan, ‘Dare to be Canadian.’ Like family values, Canadian pride is engrained in Beverly Hills’ DNA.

“My parents always said that if it wasn’t for Canada, they would not have had the opportunities they had,” Vaccaro explains. “It was something that was very dear to them and has always stayed with me and Cosmo.”

High labour costs are the biggest obstacle to manufacturing in Canada. Vaccaro has done the math, though. He’s aware an overseas factory could produce his lines for less, but as someone who scrutinizes the work coming out of every department, quality control is his main focus and as he sees it, the consumer’s, too. Instead of cutting costs like labour, he looks for efficiencies in the manufacturing process itself, which ultimately trickle down to the retailer, and in turn, the buying public.

“If you’re able to produce something and produce it well and in an efficient manner, you can remain competitive,” he says. “And that’s through employee training and having the best equipment available.

“My mission is to bring manufacturing back to Canada,” he says. “When a consumer walks into a store and looks at our product, they’re going to ask the question, ‘Is it made in Canada?’ We want the salesperson to answer, ‘Yes, it’s not only made in Canada, but it’s made with Canadian certified gold and has a Canadian diamond in the centre. I think Canadians are very proud of our heritage and will pay more for Canadian-made product. And really, how much more is it? Like anything else, price is a factor, but quality comes first.”

Part of encouraging more manufacturing in Canada also entails helping to nurture the next generation of jewellers. Last year, Beverly Hills Jewellers co-sponsored the Giovanni Vaccaro Family Scholarship at CJ Expos-Toronto. The national design competition bestows a \$3000 grant to a student enrolled in a Canadian college offering a jewellery program, while the school receives a \$1000 gift.

Vaccaro says he understands how tough it is to break into the business. Fresh from his studies at George Brown, he was willing to work as a stone setter for less than minimum wage at A & A Jewellers to gain experience.

“But they couldn’t give me less than \$4.50 per hour and they told me to just do my best,” he recalls.

Now, Vaccaro wants to pay it forward. “My parents did guide me into this industry, but there was a manufacturer who was willing to take a chance on me,” he explains. “The scholarship is about giving someone a chance to be allowed to do what they love doing. There’s nothing better than coming to work and loving what you do. I feel I’ve never worked a day in my life. It’s all fun for me. I have my challenges, but there’s never been a day where I’ve said I was going to ‘work.’”

If Vaccaro has anything to say about it, tomorrow’s up-and-coming jewellers will get the same break. ♦