

Artist's Statement

Raised in a family of artists, carpenters, writers, dancers, and die-hard do-it-yourselfers, creativity was a constant in my life. Whether it was my mother's crocheted dolls, my dad's "bench cabinets," or my aunt's woven baskets, the people around me had a talent for turning their ideas into well-made and beautiful things. Instead of passively appreciating art or furniture around me, I always found myself examining their structure, trying to figure out what made them work, both functionally and aesthetically. As a child in the homes of family friends who were Indian, African, Persian, Latin American, and Irish, I was exposed to art from all over the world. Now I see inspiration in everything -- architecture, textiles, even the lines of innovative choreography. Many years of dance trained my eye to see composition in motion, and the fluidity of wire in my designs as well as the drape of stones are both direct descendants of that training.

I have struggled with health problems all of my life, and in 2001 I was no longer able to work due to a rare genetic disorder called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Part of learning to live with my disability has been exploring what abilities I still have. I have been making jewelry for myself and for friends since the early 1990s, and when I found myself unable to even get out of bed some days, I turned to jewelry making as a creative outlet. Dejahmi continues to grow into a business that will sustain me financially in the same way that it has creatively.

I can't remember when I first heard of a sweatshop, but I do remember when I first realized their connection to my own work. As I bought supplies for my designs, I began to wonder whose hands they had been in before mine. Were they fashioned by someone living the kind of life I wanted, working in an inspiring studio, doing what they loved and creating their own art? Or were they in the more likely surroundings of a dirty, crowded factory, in danger of losing a finger or a limb to unsafe machinery? Or maybe living in a village where the local gold mine polluted the drinking water with mercury or arsenic? The stones that only moments before looked so appealing began to lose their luster. In my search for more information about social and economic sustainability, I came across businesses that were concerned with the same things I was. I learned that although sometimes difficult, it is possible to find materials made by people who are paid fair wages and have safe working conditions. I now incorporate these materials into my own designs. As I have found more sources, I'm getting closer to reaching my goal of using 100% sustainable materials, but I am not there yet. In addition to designing with sustainable materials, I know that by using them I am helping to gain exposure and develop the market for them as well. I hope to serve as a resource to connect customers and other designers with information about sustainability. I believe beautiful things do not have to be made from the suffering of others, and I believe the spirit behind my work makes it that much more beautiful.



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Sustainability:

The ability to provide for the needs of the world's current population without damaging the ability of future generations to provide for themselves. When a process is sustainable, it can be carried out over and over without negative environmental effects or impossibly high costs to anyone involved.

(definition taken from <http://www.sustainabletable.org/intro/dictionary/#s>)

Dejahmi creates beautiful jewelry that is competitive in the fashion/luxury market but also strives to be sustainable at every level of production by using fair-trade and recycled components and incorporating well-paid and safe labor conditions. Dejahmi's current market includes boutiques and galleries that sell small batch, handmade items to customers who want pieces that are unique or artist made. We also sell to individuals who look for products that decrease negative impact on ecology and economy by using sustainable labor and materials in their production. Dejahmi jewelry is not just "eco-neutral", but "eco-positive." By using materials from Sustainable projects all over the world and developing a well-paid US labor force with people who do not fit into the traditional job market (such as single mothers and the disabled), we are contributing to the rebuilding of a stable, more personal, economic environment.

Reflecting the best the world has to offer, our jewelry's beauty comes not just from its luxe materials, but also from the relationships that bring it together into finished pieces of wearable art. These human connections are mirrored in the handmade wire links that connect every component. The beads, metals, pearls, and filigree are produced by hand all over the world* by artists who work in safe environments, are paid a living wage, and participate in the healthy growth of their communities. Much of the luxury product industry is destructive to the lives of those who produce it. Our goal is that every life that comes in contact with Dejahmi will be bettered, leaving the world a better place than we found it, just like our Mommas taught us.

Dejahmi Jewelry incorporates Fair-Trade (FT) Metals, FT Recycled Bottle Glass, FT Gemstones, and various other Recycled components (Vintage Glass Beads, Recycled Wire, Vintage Chain, etc...). We also include Swarovski Crystal because it is manufactured and not mined, so it doesn't have the same negative ecological impact that the mainstream gemstone trade does. Our research shows that Swarovski has very good labor, humanitarian, and environmental records. When we want to use a fun color or shape that isn't available to us in Fair-Trade gems, we use Swarovski.

Dejahmi is also phasing out the use of Freshwater Pearls. Previously, our policy was to buy only Fair Trade Pearls which addressed human rights issues related to pearl production. This, however, did not address animal rights, which is something Dejahmi is strongly committed to. Ultimately, we decided that we needed to eliminate Fresh Water Pearls from our designs, replacing them Swarovski Pearls.

Beth Respass, the Owner and Designer of Dejahmi, grew up in a very socially and politically aware household. She was torn that she was so drawn to design instead of "service-oriented" work, until she connected how horrible conditions were in the production end of the garment and accessories industry. A friend once said to Beth that she didn't know there were sweatshop issues with jewelry. Beth replied, "If you can make something, you can exploit someone else to make it." By developing a company that offers high quality jewelry with sustainable practices, Beth can express her love of design while still feeling like she is "giving back" to society.