



Rock Hard

DESIGN HOUSE by Melissa de Valcourt

Rock Harder

When Jeff Spencer, master jewelry designer, walked into Rock Hard Designs Jewelry store in downtown Pensacola twenty-one years ago to apply for a job, he was what you

might call a "diamond in the rough." He had just moved to Pensacola and although he'd worked in the jewelry industry for years in various capacities, he really didn't know what his next career move would be. He contemplated doing something totally different, such

as electrical work. The fact that he almost quit jewelry work altogether, makes you question how he became one of the most talented jewelry designers around. If you ask him, his answer would be meeting the owner and late Gregory "Rocky" Hard, of Rock Hard Jewelry.



Jeff first got hired at Rock Hard so many years ago as a general jeweler, and not for his custom work. At the time, Rock Hard already had a full staff and a great business going. Jeff had to prove himself so to speak, into the position of designing custom work alongside Rocky. "Over the years Rocky kept feeding me difficult stuff and I kept coming through for him."

We were kind of like peanut butter and jelly; he'd give me an idea and I'd make it work.

He had some really creative and different ideas. I would not have had half the opportunity to do the stuff I've done if it weren't for him. I would jump in there and figure out how to do it."

Spencer feels that the challenging working relationship he had with Rocky, pushed him out of his comfort zone, making him into the designer he is today. "I was good when I got here, but not near as good as I am now." He said that he walked a tight rope for a while and learned to adapt to Rocky's style.

What the Rock Hard Jewelry store is today, Jeff says, is an even better version of what it used to be. "Rocky got to the point where he really trusted what I did and he knew I would keep the integrity of his work, and still make it better." Rocky nicknamed Spencer "Rock Harder." The love and respect that Spencer has for Rocky and what the store is all about is evident as he smiles throughout the interview, especially when he tells us about his nickname. "I always added my own spin and continued to make something good, better. We taught each other a lot and together made Rock Hard what it is today."



It was Jeff's brother, also in the local jewelry scene, who introduced them. My brother said, 'You have to meet this guy. He does some really off the wall, neat custom stuff.' After meeting Rocky, everything I'd done up to that point, seemed to lead up to that moment. That's when my career really started."

Spencer had originally learned jewelry repair from his brother working at Zale's together in the 80's. Over the years, he learned to really love custom jewelry work, rather than repair. Jeff also mentions his mother's influence on his sculpting skills. "Mom used to always have us do arts and crafts; we were always making something. When I was 8 years old she gave me a ball of clay and I started sculpting with it and I loved it! Basically, what I do now, is just an extension of that."



Carla showed us some current pieces which are very feminine with large pink stones and opals, while Jeff pointed out that his signature on many of the pieces is a skull. The remodeled store is a gorgeous symbol, congruent with the Rock Hard style and design.



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Rocky passed away 3 years ago, and in that time the store has been completely re-designed by Carla Hard, the owner and Rocky's wife. Carla has "made it her own" in terms of design, representing a new phase for Rock Hard. The store is brighter, very glam and more feminine than it used to be, but also has an edgier look with some blacks and grays mixed throughout, which represents both Carla and Jeff's style. Carla showed us some current pieces which are very feminine with large pink stones and opals, while Jeff pointed out that his signature on many of the pieces is a skull.

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Although the store has a new look, Jeff says it's important for everyone to know that what has not changed is that they're carrying on the Rock Hard tradition of quality. The Burning Water pieces, designed by Rocky, are still being done. "Everything that Rocky did we're still doing." Jeff's favorite things to do are sculpting custom jewelry as well as the free-form Burning Water design that Rocky started.