



WAT

When Susan Black's doctor, concerned about Black's well-being after losing her husband to Alzheimer's, suggested she take up gardening as a hobby, she knew one thing—any hobby she chose would require being indoors in air conditioning.

A couple of months later, she found that hobby while perusing the arts-and-crafts section at the Dickens Festival in Muscle Shoals. She became intrigued by a lady making craft jewelry and could not get it out of her mind.

"I thought to myself that I could do something like that but do it differently. Instead of using craft beads, I looked to use vintage jewelry to create art and stories," Black said. "I started going to estate sales and doing auctions until I could amass enough jewels to start something."

She began by creating fun pieces, like putting together a floral bouquet with brooches. It was fun, but she knew she wanted to do something even deeper.

And Black found that deeper meaning on Christmas Eve 2025.

"I was by myself, which wasn't a negative thing. It

was my choice. I wanted to pretend these days were normal. I just wanted to get through the holidays. I wanted to get to January," Black said. "I sat down in my art room and said to myself, 'I think I want to do some sort of family tree.' And before I knew it, all of my emotions came out in this one piece."

The piece was an imperfect family tree, with the roots in upheaval and broken, and some branches missing and disjointed. To Black, it represented the act of reminiscing about Christmas past—those holidays with grandparents, aunts, uncles—when one's family tree was full.

"My grandparents are gone, my parents are gone, and I recently lost my husband; this piece was just kind of showing how the tree changes, but I didn't want to end with just that," Black said.

So, she continued to work, creating a second piece using a cameo missing its middle, leaving just a frame of what once was. Black says this piece reminded her of the empty chair at the holiday table.

"I was getting really deep and dark and depressed, and I thought to myself that there had to be a resolu-





tion. And then I found a cameo in my collection that was a light green color,” Black said. “When I looked at this cameo, I could see the outline, very faint, of a child’s face. It was a sign of hope, there’s life again. That’s how I started the whole collection of storytelling through cameos.”

The cameo art has touched Black personally, and she has noticed others responding to the pieces. She recently completed her first craft show, where she displayed a piece she calls “Silenced Echoes.” The artwork, a fragmented tree, replicates a family tree that has experienced both loss and additions.

“Two ladies were really intrigued by the piece. They said, ‘You really had something that affected you.’ I told them that my husband had recently passed away, and that I started reflecting on all the things. They told me the piece was powerful,” Black said.

Black says that often people have a jewelry box, a drawer, or even a cardboard box full of jewelry and brooches that belonged to their grandmother, their aunts, or their mom. These pieces, she says, have stories behind them.

“People tell me that they have these heirlooms, and their children do not want them. If you leave these pieces in a drawer, they do not have a con-

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nection. But if you create something with them and display it, your kids can learn the stories behind those pieces. The art becomes a piece of their legacy, too," Black said. "And when you think about it, they say we are only two generations away from being forgotten. If we are fortunate, we know our great-grandparents. But once we pass away, our kids lose a generation. They don't know about them. They don't know their legacy. They don't know their stories unless they have been written down or, in my case, shown through jewelry."

Black started doing custom work using her customers' family pieces and, at times, adding some of her own collection she obtained at estate sales, garage sales, and online. While creating a recent order, she realized how impactful her artwork can be. A lady asked Black to create five pieces for her using her mother-in-law's jewelry. Black asked about the family, but her customer knew little about them, as she was in a second marriage.

"When I gave her the pieces, both she and her husband were in tears. The first piece was floral, and because she didn't give me many options, I





had to be selective. At the bottom, I added a roadrunner. I have never used a roadrunner before, but I felt very strong about adding it,” Black said. “The piece was for her brother-in-law, who loved motorcycles, and they called him Roadrunner.”

Once again, the tears flowed when she delivered the second piece. This time, Black added a dragonfly brooch to the artwork. The piece was a gift to a second brother who had lost his wife a few years prior, and he told the family he was ready to start dating again and that he thinks about dating when he sees dragonflies flying over the lake because they tend to stay together.

“I was led to those pieces. They were my pieces. So, not only was it symbolically powerful for them, it tells their story, too, and it links them to the mother-in-law through the jewelry,” Black said.

Besides heirloom artwork, Black also enjoys creating simple pieces.

“I love the ones that I do where it is just simple flowers, and then maybe it has a bee coming toward the flower,” Black said. “And then sometimes, I’ll do a dew drop using a crystal bead that’s coming off the flower.”

Black’s artistic talents come naturally. She is a nurse by day, where she says she uses the other half of her brain, but while creating, she uses her talent of putting things together. Her pieces using bluebird brooches are a good example of this.

“I acquired a box of bluebird brooches. Apparently, this family had something to do with a jewelry store, and years ago had ordered it for inventory, but it never got put out,” Black said. “I’ve done several pieces with

the bluebird—simple pieces where I put him on some sort of a branch, a twig or a flower. Then you can add a nest and a butterfly in the background. He has so much personality on his own, just being a beautiful bluebird.”

When people started telling Black about their own jewelry boxes and how they had been meaning to create something with the pieces, she decided to offer group parties, including hosting them at women’s retreats, bunko groups, and women’s ministry events. Black supplies the jewelry, velvet, glue and frames.

“They just have to show up. What’s fun about the parties is that I will tell them to get their inspiration from the frame or the brooch they choose. They then find the confidence a little bit more, and then they can go home and work on the pieces that they have or try something different,” Black said. “This has been a fun way to get women talking and sharing stories about the jewelry.”

Through her artwork, custom pieces, parties, shows and the naming of her business, A Jeweled Journey, Black has achieved what her doctor set out for her to accomplish—healing.

“People helped me with the name, and the reason why we chose that was jeweled because of the jewelry, but the journey was also about what I was personally going through as the full-time caregiver for my husband. It was a journey together. And with young-onset Alzheimer’s, it’s your longest goodbye. It’s a long journey,” Black said. “I wanted to show that this jewelry is part of my journey. At first, it was a diversion, and now it’s part of the healing.”