

When Erica Lyons was a little girl growing up on Orcas, she often wandered the beaches collecting special treasures: smooth stones, dusky bits of old glass bottles, and salty, gnarled shells. Eventually, she graduated from Orcas high and went off to seek her fortune in the wide, wide world.

After college and a sojourn in San Diego, Erica is now back on the isle for the summer, turning each piece of her stockpiled sea glass into a patiently crafted work of art.

She's set up shop at the workroom of her parents' store, Orcas Arts and Gifts, where she cleans, oils, drills and finally wraps each piece in a unique design of silver or gold wire, creating earrings and necklaces for sale in the store and on a Web site she built herself.

While she says her step-father, jeweler Pat Downie, taught her to bend wire, he politely demurs.

"I showed her a little bit and she took off," he laughs.

Erica's offerings include a wide range of designs. Some are very simple, just a bit of pretty glass strung on a cord or chain. Others are rough-cut and masculine; still others are set with ornate flourishes of tiny pearls or burnished curlicues of wire.

"Some are more whimsical than others," said Erica.

For people wanting to design their own jewelry, Erica enjoys working on commission. Customers can treasure-hunt through her collection, or bring in their own finds to be wire-wrapped or strung on a necklace. Erica especially enjoyed a small customer she received the day before Mothers' Day, a little girl who couldn't quite see over the store's countertop. Cupping a small bit of sea glass she had found on the beach, she asked Erica to turn it into a necklace for her mom, dumping her purse full of coins onto the counter to pay.

Erica said tidal and seasonal changes create an environment of continual shift; the best sea-glass hunting patches tend to gradually migrate.

If you ask, she will show you her box of extra-special finds, some of them very old. Curiosity about beach detritus has also steered her toward an exploration of history.

"This is a marble from the 1800's," she says, holding up the tiny orb. "They used to make them out of clay." The box also contains chunks of glass melted by fire, antique bottle stoppers, a porcelain doll arm, a bit of a hob-nailed vase and many "weird mystery pieces," as she calls them. She says the rarest sea glass colors are orange, red, and yellow, as well as a piercingly bright aqua.

Orcas Arts and Gifts was established by Erica's mother, Suzanne Lyons, in 1988, and is now run by Suzanne and Pat. A family endeavor, the Eastsound gift shop specializes in a wide range of gifts and custom designs, pearls, diamonds, loose gemstones, sterling silver, 10k gold, 14k gold, 22k/24k gold, fine mineral and fossil specimens, jewelry repair, and more. Although the sea glass jewelry is mainly Erica's endeavor, Suzanne also enjoys crafting designs.

For more information, see www.orcaslandseaglass.com.

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