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Although her life took some interesting turns, designer Noel Cheney ended up right where she wanted to be.

By Marlene A. Prost

Jewelry designer Noel Cheney has taken many detours on her road to success.

She once worked as an insurance underwriter and as an administrator for the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) and Jewelers of America (JA). She has traveled around the world, moving from Los Angeles to Switzerland and back. She has worked on both U.S. coasts, from the beaches of southern California, to the island of Manhattan, and back to the hills of San Francisco.



Blue topaz ring from Noel Cheney's *Revolution* collection made with industrial black rubber and 18K white gold. TOP: Pyramid ring from her *Revolution* collection with diamonds and a rainbow moonstone. All jewelry photos by Robert Weldon.

"Sometimes a door opens, and you think, 'I want to go a completely opposite way.' Then another door opens," says Cheney, who has always kept her eye on one goal: to create fine colored stone jewelry. In 2003, after years of carrying her bench from place to place and fashioning jewelry for family and friends, she finally launched her own jewelry line: Noel Fine Jewelry.

At 35, Cheney is exactly where she wants to be, both professionally and personally. She is a respected and sought-after artist, voted favorite designer by her peers in *Colored Stone's* second annual Reader's Choice competition. On a personal note, she and her husband, Mike, enjoy living by the beautiful San Francisco Bay and are expecting their first baby in November.

Cheney's fans agree that her artwork reflects her passion for living. Cheney says she is inspired by her husband, family, friends, and the nature that surrounds her "everywhere I look."

Then there is her lifelong romance with gemstones. Cheney's mother, a German-born craft artist, and her Swiss father married in the United States and moved to Winterthur, Switzerland, when Cheney was a child. There, she grew up exploring mountain paths, filling her pockets with quartz crystals. "It was rocks," she chuckles. "We had good friends — jewelers — who would travel around the world and buy stones. They would give me a pearl or a gemstone. It was the end-all and be-all. I absolutely loved them."

After college, Cheney tried to land a four-year goldsmith apprenticeship, but “it was hard for women to get an apprenticeship.” Disappointed, “I did what my parents hinted they wanted me to do — go to work at a bank or insurance company.” She did the latter.

With one door closed, Cheney looked for another way in. She spent part of her eight weeks’ annual vacation in Idar-Oberstein, Germany, literally standing at the elbow of a master lapidary cutter and jeweler until he agreed to take her on as an apprentice. “I don’t think he appreciated it, but I was persistent. He was a very nice man; he had a heart of gold.”

Cheney noticed that her mentor had GIA certifications and decided to attend the GIA herself. But first, she took a year to travel around the world to Asia, Australia, New Zealand, the Fiji Islands, Easter Island, and South America.

That done, she moved to California and became a graduate jeweler at GIA headquarters. She even set up a small studio in Los Angeles and made jewelry for family and friends, “all revolving around the stone.” But her path was diverted again when GIA invited her to join its staff. She then took several years to set up and manage JA’s master bench jeweler certification program, moving to New York to run the program, then back to Los Angeles as executive director of the California Jewelers Association.



A *Trio* ring in 18K white gold with blue chalcedony featuring Cheney’s signature “bumps.”

“I didn’t let my bench go dusting away,” she says. In 2003, she decided it was time to launch Noel Fine Jewelry.

Unique and bold are two words often used to describe Cheney’s designs. Her pieces are characterized by clean, geometric shapes and huge center gemstones. She’s also known for her unique metal finishing techniques, like the “bumps” on rings in her *Revolution* collection.

“I really like the clean lines Noel has in her designs, as well as the way she combines the gems with the shape of the piece,” says one Reader’s Choice voter.



An 18K white gold pendant from Cheney’s *Windows* collection with aquamarine and diamonds.

Adds another: “I love her jewelry for [its] striking yet uncomplicated elegance.”

Cheney has collected colored stones for years, from her travels around the world to the Tucson shows. “Initially, I did a lot of blues, aquamarine to topaz,” she says. “Lately, I’m on a carnelian kick; I have a lot of red now.”

Cheney doesn’t hesitate to explore new media. The materials she uses range from precious metals like silver, 18K gold, and platinum to silk and wood. Recently, industrial rubber has gotten a lot of play in her *Revolution* line of blue topaz, moonstone, and green-blue tourmaline rings.

“I wanted to do something with industrial rubber, like nitrile. I saw people had used it for rubber cords and bracelets. I knew it could be malleable. I walked into Home Depot and said, ‘I’m looking for something made out of black rubber.’ “ The salesperson found black rubber boots in the garden department, but Cheney liked the weather stripping used at the bottom of doors. She tracked down the manufacturer and bought the material in sheets.

In terms of design, Cheney is unabashedly influenced by Art Deco. “I love Erte!”

“[Art Deco designers] had fun experimenting with different things. I love the clean lines, the boldness,” she continues.

Those principles blend well with her fascination with the world around her. “I spend hours on end looking at a Metro sign in Paris, asking, ‘How can I put this in jewelry?’ “

The answer is to set huge square and round gemstones in geometric metal frames, like the dramatic, one-of-a-kind aquamarine and citrine pieces in her *Windows* collection. “My jewelry is bold. . . . You wear a *Trio* ring, it gets noticed,” she says.



Her work is sold at art and crafts shows and even home shows, which are “a lot of fun.”

Cheney is grateful to her family and friends for the success she has achieved. Through her work with education and certification programs, she has also demonstrated her appreciation for the apprenticeship and mentoring she received years ago in Idar-Oberstein.

Inspired by family members who have dealt with cancer, she donates the proceeds from her unique lapel pin, the “Come Together Pin,” to the American Cancer Society.

The sterling silver pin, in her signature square cut, is designed with two metal finishing techniques, “to signify the different kinds of people touched by different kinds of cancer.” The metal is etched with rays that signify hope — a theme that sits at the core of Cheney’s designs, and her life and work as well.