

# SEAGLASSWEAR™ & SEASTONEWEAR™

Jewelry from the sea by valerie gates

The Wellesley Townsman  
on TOWNONLINE.com



## By the sea, by the beautiful sea

Emmy Award-winner becomes jewelry designer

***By Anne-Marie Smolski / Townsman Staff / Wellesley Townsman  
Thursday, July 17, 2003***

### **Recycles precious sea glass into jewelry from the ocean**

Last July, Valerie Gates had no idea she'd be developing a line of sea glass jewelry. This July, her creations are in shops and museum stores nationwide.

For 40 years, her aunt had combed the beaches of Cape Cod searching for the jewels from the sea. She died last July and left behind her vast collection, a cache of five or six big bucketsful of sea glass. Her family decided that Gates, an artist, would probably be the one to do something creative with the treasure trove. And that's exactly what she did.

Sitting in her Cottage Street studio/office, the 37-year-old married mother of two is wearing one of her pendants. The pale green stone that's wrapped with sterling silver and hangs from a ring of the same metal complements her sea foam-colored blouse.

Her husband, Barry Friedman, and children, Cameron, 7, and Olivia, 3, are nearby. This is a home-based business, and it seems to be working.

Cameron holds up a bracelet and says, "One time she made rock jewelry."

Gates says her son tells all the moms at the Hunnewell School about his mother's enterprise. "They're very good kids. I'm really lucky," she says. "They help me. I offer Cam a penny a piece for sea glass. He comes

# SEAGLASSWEAR™ & SEASTONEWEAR™

Jewelry from the sea by valerie gates

back with his pockets full. He sometimes gets a dollar for walking the beach for an hour.

"And Liv, who's learning her colors, is learning how to sort colors for me. She likes to wear my jewelry."

Although Cameron sometimes gets to fill his pockets with the sea glass, there is far less available than there used to be.

When bottles are discarded, sea glass is formed after years of sand, salt water and rocks have smoothed away the rough edges of the broken glass. Because of recycling and littering fines, and because there are more plastic bottles these days, the supply of the pretty glass is becoming scanty. Gates says she just can't find big, chunky pieces anymore, and it's difficult for her at times to find matching pieces, not only in shape but in color.

A table at one end of her studio holds stacks of blue-colored plastic boxes full of sorted sea glass. There are buckets below the table, full of the unsorted gems. A large wooden tray on the tabletop holds more glass, and stacks of white gift boxes are waiting to be filled with jewelry items.

Gates holds up some of the glass and talks about the colors. The lavender glass is old. White sea glass has a chemical compound in it that reacts to the sunlight to give it its appearance. Purple-colored glass is vintage World War II. Cobalt blue is rare. It may have come from old medicine bottles or Nivea bottles, she says. The rarest color is red. Blue is the second rarest and lavender is third. Green- and brown-colored glass is from beer bottles; blue/green from Coke bottles. The most popular color, says Gates, is blue/green - "maybe because it looks like the ocean. It appeals to people on many different levels. It's a memory thing, but it's also an organic thing."

Originally using the glass to make jewelry mementos for her cousins, she, too, started wearing her creations. She'd go to parties and the jewelry would capture a lot of attention. Women would ask her where she got it because they wanted to buy it for themselves. Their interest and praise were the sparks that got her business going. "It's fun to make something that women love," Gates says.

When she first started making earrings, bracelets, pins, necklaces and pendants, she used brass wire from the hardware store to wrap the glass. She laughs at some of her earliest work. She also made jewelry using gold, but found that women wear and like silver more. Once a month she orders a supply of sterling silver over the Internet from someone in New Mexico. She's found a gauge that's pliable - that at the same time holds the glass in place well. There is no glue or solder holding the silver to the glass in her creations.

After starting the jewelry-making business last July, she got her creations into four shops on the Cape by August. She's a Woods Hole native and visits family there.

In September, she asked the Museum of Fine Arts if they ever carried items made by local artists. They took some of her pieces on consignment. After getting into the MFA, she started e-mailing museums across the country. She would mention which other museums were carrying the jewelry, and that had the credibility factor going for her. Soon, museums all over the United States were selling the sea gems.

Seaglasswear, Gates' jewelry company, features one-of-a-kind, handmade items. They include earrings that retail for \$48; a single pendant for \$64; pins at \$52; bracelets at \$96; and full necklaces with 15 pieces of wrapped sea glass for \$184. A popular item is the all-white necklace, which Gates calls "pearls from the sea." Other items can be custom

## SEAGLASSWEAR™ & SEASTONEWEAR™

Jewelry from the sea by valerie gates

made. Gates tells of an order that Sam Shaw Jewelry in Northeast Harbor, Maine, placed for 15 napkin holders for a client who was having a summer party. She just basically left the clasps off bracelets, and they sold for \$100 apiece.

Gates put the jewelry into an art-jewelry market because "I couldn't possibly mass produce it because I'm the only one who creates it." In addition to being in museums, her work is also carried in galleries and stores, including E.A. Davis in Wellesley.

"To create an identity for this was very easy," says Gates, who, along with her husband, owns Gates Studio, which shares space with her jewelry-making studio. A photographer, graphic designer and film director, Gates has created all kinds of marketing items, including CD packaging, movie posters, music videos, commercials, book and video covers, logos, brochures and Web sites. She is the creative director, and her husband is the production director of their company. They both hold the same degrees from Brown University - in semiotics and art. (Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols for visual communication.) While at Brown, Gates took advantage of the collaboration the school had with the Rhode Island School of Design and says at RISD she learned all kinds of things that are the foundation for what she does now.

After they married 15 years ago, the couple traveled cross-country to Los Angeles, where Friedman enrolled in a master's program offered there by Emerson College. Six months later, he was discovered on the streets of L.A. and was asked to be a model in Italy for a men's line of clothing. Putting everything in storage, the couple left for Milan. Gates says there was no way she was going to let her husband go to Italy alone. While in Milan, Gates worked as a fashion photographer for Armani.

They returned to L.A., where Gates went to work as a creative director for national broadcast projects for CBS, ABC and Women's Entertainment. Five years ago they moved back to Boston when she was asked to be the in-house art director for CBS-Boston (WBZ-4). She has won an Emmy, the CBS Eye-On-Excellence Award and BDA, PROMAX and AF/SONY national directing awards. She has also photographed famous personalities, including Ronald Reagan, Magic Johnson, Wayne Gretsky and WBZ personalities such as Liz Walker, Jack Williams and Bob Lobel.

Gates left Channel 4 three years ago to start Gates Studio with her husband so she could have more time with her children. At the same time, Suzanne Bates was leaving the station to start a company of her own. She coaches executives and needed an identity package for the new business. Gates says Gates Studio got a lot of referrals from Bates. Many of the clients, who are women executives who are starting their own businesses that Gates designs Web sites for, will also buy jewelry, she says. Other Gates Studio clients include Sapient, Reebok, New Line Cinema, Warner Bros. Records and Motown.

Besides honoring her aunt by using her collection of sea glass for jewelry, Gates says that "it's the ultimate recycling. It's taking something that was thrown away. The ocean re-creates it into a really beautiful jewel, and now women are wearing it at elegant parties. It's really an interesting reversal of fortune."

Valerie Gates, along with "Sea Glass Chronicles" author C.S. Lambert, will appear at "A Midsummer's Night Treat," an evening trunk show and book signing, at oolala, 104 Palmer Ave., Falmouth, on Thursday, July 24, from 6 to 8 p.m. The public is invited for wine and cheese and the chance to mingle with the jewelry-maker and the author. Those who will be attending are invited to bring their sea glass, and Lambert will tell them where she thinks it came from.

For more information about Valerie Gates' sea glass jewelry, e-mail [valerie@gatestudio.com](mailto:valerie@gatestudio.com) or visit [www.gatestudio.com/seaglasswear](http://www.gatestudio.com/seaglasswear).