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Silvia Engel-Suarez's jewelry brings solace to people grieving the loss of a loved one.

BY AMANDA SEBASTIANO | CONTRIBUTOR

Growing up in a family of artists, Silvia Engel-Suarez had no choice but to be creative. A native of Mexico, Engel-Suarez was raised in the company of oil painters, singers and potters. When she moved to the United States 25 years ago, she continued to nurture her innate passion for art.

She moved to Iowa and began importing silver from her home country. She crafted custom jewelry out of the malleable metal, selling the pieces until the price of silver skyrocketed.

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Her business, Love Ashes, was born in 2007, when her 1-year-old West Highland terrier, Kiki, was hit and killed by a car. Heartbroken, Engel-Suarez Googled ways to memorialize her pet and discovered a technique that allowed her to fuse cremated ashes with dichroic glass — a special kind of color-changing glass developed by NASA.

Eight years later, the 47-year-old mother of three is still handcrafting pendants with ashes. She runs her business out of a small workshop in her Lakewood Ranch home, where she designs, hand-cuts and fires her line of keepsakes.

“The pieces are bright and beautiful,” Engel-Suarez says. “They represent a person and who they were in life.” LWR Life sat down with Engel-Suarez to learn more about her craft.



Engel-Suarez offers a variety of memorial pendants at loveashes.com, in addition to custom designs.

How is Love Ashes different from other pieces of memorial jewelry?

I knew I wanted to memorialize Kiki, so I searched for jewelry, and all I found were little vials you could put your pet's ashes in. They weren't cute. I knew I could make glass jewelry. I had been doing it for a while, so I created a few pieces through trial and error. I learned how to fuse ashes with glass. It wasn't a perfect technique in the beginning, but it worked.

Why did you turn the idea into a business?

When my friend's cat died, she wanted a piece. Word of mouth got around about what I was doing and I thought, “I have a business here.” I went to a funeral expo, where vendors presented caskets, urns and other items. I received a great response. Big organizations encouraged me to attend an international convention, so I hauled tables, decorations and jewelry from Iowa to Texas, and I won the Best of the Best New Product Award. From there, my idea just took off.

How difficult is it to work with ashes?

The texture is like powdered sugar when you're baking. I use one-quarter teaspoon of fine ashes for each piece. Ashes come in different colors and textures. Animal ashes are different than human ashes. The process isn't easy. I work with grinders and saws to shape the glass. Most glass starts as a pancake shape until I cut out the shape I want. Custom pieces are hard. The customer doesn't know what the piece will look like until the very end, which is different from picking out a design in my catalog. I sketch as much as I can and send them pictures to keep them updated in the process.

You work in a sensitive industry. How do you handle working with clients who are grieving?

It's a hard business. You're dealing with someone who lost a loved one. The stories are hard to hear. A woman lost four pets in a house fire. My neighbor's husband died and she wanted a piece to remember him by. I watched the couple's whole journey. A husband of a good friend in Mexico died a couple months ago and I created a piece for her. Those were difficult pieces to make. There comes a point where you have to accept death as a natural process, but it's still hard.

What's most rewarding about your work?

I have a scrapbook full of letters of appreciation. I get to create something that brings a little peace and closure to people. That's special to me. I love waking up the day after I've left a piece in the kiln overnight. I can't wait to see what it looks like. It's like opening gifts on Christmas morning.



Engel-Suarez at work in her small home studio.

What does your workspace look and sound like?

Well, I don't work at a set time of day. Sometimes, you can find me hunched over at 2 a.m. on a Saturday. My schedule is flexible. My Pandora stations are always playing. I love Dave Matthews Band and John Mayer. Some days I listen to salsa; my music depends on my mood. I also like to workout before I start on pieces. I feel refreshed after, and I get rid of any bad energy built up throughout the day. Once I close the door and turn my music on, I'm good. I'll work until 6 p.m. and realize I never ate lunch. This is my therapy.

Do you have a favorite piece?

I don't think so. Each piece is different. I made a piece for someone whose bird, Ginger, died. The bird was gray, yellow and orange, and I was able to incorporate those colors into the work. The owner told me I had no idea how special the finished product was to her. My neighbor has a blue heart to remember her husband. That was another special design. I've made thousands of pieces.

Why did you start working with glass?

I met an artist doing similar work. She gave me a two-hour class. I was self-taught otherwise. I've ruined a lot of glass over the years, but I love experimenting and seeing what I can make. I Google a lot. I've developed my own unique style and sense of color. I blame my color preferences on my culture. I love greens and blues. I love red too, but it's hard to achieve that color with glass. Sometimes I have no clue what to make until I use the glass cutter. It just happens.



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