

## Herzog Jewelers Thriving in the Internet Age

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**FORT MITCHELL** - It takes intense pressures, extreme temperatures and an eternity of time to form a black graceless clump of carbon into a glimmering crystal that can be shaped and cut into a timeless symbol of commitment.

However, to buy a diamond, it takes a trusted jeweler who looks at each sale as the beginning of a relationship. This can be as rare as finding the perfect stone.

Herzog Jewelers of Fort Mitchell has been developing those trusted relationships with Northern Kentuckians since 1922. The company's founder, Elmer T. Herzog, began this tradition at his first store on Covington's Madison Avenue. Herzog Jewelers' current proprietor and Elmer's son-in-law, Joseph Koester, carries it on from their store on Dixie Highway in Fort Mitchell.

### Personal Service

One client who has learned to trust Herzog is Anne Milburn. Her first purchase was the engagement ring she bought with her then-fiancé, now-husband, Joe from Elmer Herzog 50 years ago. Today she sports a custom bracelet and other pieces they designed and manufactured for her. She still visits the store monthly to see what's new and exciting. Today, she is buying charms for bracelets she bought from Herzog for her grandchildren. It's a gift that she gives each Easter and Christmas so another generation can share in the Herzog tradition.

The Herzog showroom at 2510 Dixie Highway in a building shared with Huntington Bank is elegant but welcoming. Koester wears slacks, a conservative soft blue dress shirt and unassuming tie. The only jewelry he wears is a watch, his wedding band, and an understated mixed-metal John Atencio bracelet. The appearance of the store supports the trusted-friend quality that is a hallmark of Herzog. It is decorated with rich blue carpet and light-colored display cases showing under not-too-bright lights some of the finest jewelry that Koester has found on his trips abroad.

Since the beginning in 1922, Elmer Herzog built his business by building trust with his clients, being active in the community, and providing outstanding customer service. This philosophy paid off by having a successful business until his retirement 58 years later in 1980.

Elmer's daughter Valera, now an English teacher at Simon Kenton High School, married Joseph Koester Jr. who then joined the firm in 1975 to continue serving his clients. Koester maintained the tradition of service by becoming and remaining Northern Kentucky's only graduate gemologist. In 1982, as his clients moved to the suburbs, Koester followed them by moving the store to its current Dixie Highway location.

### Third Generation

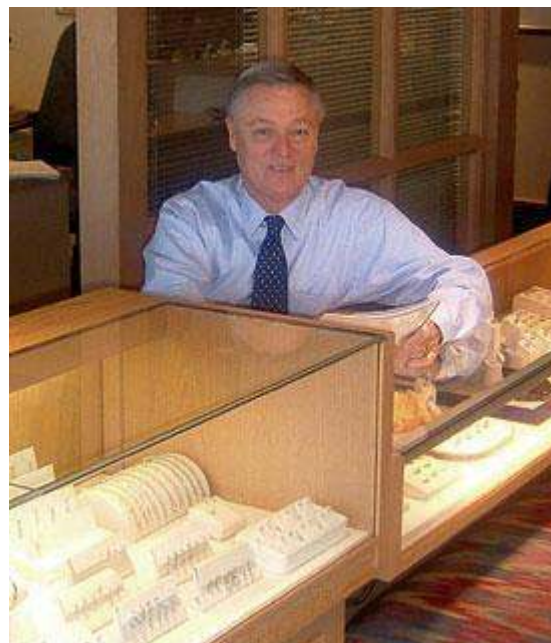
Now Elmer Herzog grandson Ted Koester, a Marquette University graduate, has also become a graduate gemologist to help serve the grandchildren of his grandfather's original clients. Another of Elmer's grandchildren, Suzanne Koester, has also joined the firm functioning as office manager and community liaison.

They still remember and apply the lessons learned in the 1920's.

"It's all about customer service," Ted Koester said. "Being there for your clients."

"And trust," his father Joseph added.

That trust leads to making custom pieces like the one Milburn wears on her wrist. This is a daily activity at Herzog. Clients are encouraged to bring sketches, magazine clippings or just the vague idea for a piece of jewelry they have in mind. Such was the



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**A REAL GEM:** Joseph Koester offers a variety of personalized services to clients at his Fort Mitchell jewelry store.

case for a client who wanted to buy his wife a pendant. The client knew his wife loved a gem called aquamarine. Joseph Koester sat down with this long-time client at the Herzog office and together with pencil, paper, and imagination they sketched out a aquamarine gem surrounded by four carats of diamonds that the client - and one hopes his wife - will find stunning.

Although helping clients create custom jewelry is an interesting part of their day, another is helping couples find the perfect ring for their wedding engagement. While many couples come together to choose their ring, oftentimes it is the nervous bridegroom unsure of how to choose a quality ring at the best price. For either situation, the Koesters use an educational process. First, a private meeting is held during which the client is shown the difference in sizes and quality of diamonds. Joseph Koester recommends that the bridegroom come alone to this meeting to determine what quality and price range is best for him. Once these aspects are narrowed down, the couple can come to pick a setting and a specific diamond. Those intimidated by a first-time jewelry purchase shouldn't be, Joseph Koester said.

"The sales process is not complete until the bride is happy," he said.

### **Projecting Style Trends**

One of the Koesters' skills is thinking nine months ahead in fashion and style of jewelry. Looking over his extensive and varied bridal collection Joseph Koester said, "It's all platinum or white gold settings now. For my generation it was yellow gold, before that it was white again."

Since tastes change quickly, the Koesters keep on top of fashion by keeping in constant touch with merchants in Antwerp, Belgium (considered the world's diamond capital) and other professionals through organizations like the Independent Jewelers Organization and the American Gem Society.

The Koester family's dedication to service extends beyond their clients and into the community at large. Joseph Koester, active in local politics and charities, has served on the Northern Kentucky Water Board since 1999 and both he and his daughter Suzanne serve on committees for the St. Elizabeth Medical Center Foundation.

The Koester family and Herzog Jewelers have resisted challenges from Internet sellers and national chains since 1922 by building their store on a solid foundation of knowledge, experience and longevity. Now with the third generation showing the same dedication to building trusting relationships, Herzog may be around for another 82 years. That would surely have made the late Elmer Herzog proud.

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