

The Pueblo Chieftain

Jewelry maker's unique creation selected for Ripley's book of oddities

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You probably don't get this type of phone call from your friends:

"Hey, just wanted to let you know there's a dead cat on the corner."

Or: "My dogs just brought me a squirrel. Do you want it?"

These calls aren't a daily occurrence for Kim Kowalski, but if her friends happen to spot an animal that's no longer among the living, there's a reason they dial her number: Kowalski creates jewelry and much of her work features animal bones.

"I've always liked weird," she said, smiling.

'Honoring its life'

Sure, it's a different pursuit, though an Internet search will show it's not that unusual. But Kowalski happily agrees that her life path isn't a linear one.

She and her husband, Ken, met thanks to their love of tarantulas: He saw her in a coffee shop reading a book about the spiders and made his move. A large tarantula tattoo on her left shoulder is "my engagement ring," she said, laughing. They keep several of the spiders at home (along with their dogs, Chuck and Smalls).

The jewelry work started about two years ago. It is a collision of Kowalski's passions for animals and medicine.

"Look at it as recycling," she said. "You're honoring its life by making this beautiful thing."

One of her pieces — a pendant containing a gopher pelvis, butterfly wing and finch foot — was selected to be included in "Ripley's Believe It or Not! Eye-Popping Oddities." The book was published last month.





Kowalski had submitted information about some of her work to Ripley's via its website, but said she received a "thanks, but no thanks" letter in return. Several months later, however, Ripley's representatives contacted her and wanted to use her pendant in the book.

It's a small, intricate piece of jewelry, the type of creation that appeals to Kowalski's interests and strengths.

"I always liked little things inside other things," she said. "I can make things look symmetrical, which people like, and from far away it looks like something else. Then they get close and freak out."

It suits her for another reason, too: Kowalski has obsessive compulsive disorder.

"I have different things I obsess over and this is the jackpot," she said. "Basically, if I'm not actively working on jewelry, I'm thinking about it.

"(This ability is) because of OCD. I owe so much to this issue."

Questions and answers

Kowalski, 43, has built a successful jewelry store on the Etsy website ([cleverkimscurios.com](https://www.etsy.com/shop/cleverkimscurios)). She pairs the bones and insects with wood, gemstones, metal and leather.

She's always ready for the first question most people ask.

"No, I do not kill anything," she said. "They're dead when I get them."

Her website includes an explanation about how she acquires and processes bones.

"I try to be completely transparent. I tell people everything I know because I'd want to know."

Kowalski gets bones from "the Internet or the side of the road," she said. She has reputable online sources but sometimes finds carcasses close to home, whether as the result of a vehicle-animal collision, overeager canines or natural death.

"Right now, snakes are pretty easy to find and make into something," she said.

The process

Bone collectors must follow federal and state laws regarding what they can possess and whether or not they can sell it. Most birds are off limits.

Once bones are in her possession, Kowalski begins extensive steps to clean and sanitize them. She has a small enclosure outside her house for that process and takes many precautions while working with the bones, including wearing a respirator or dust mask.

“I’m a germaphobe,” she said. “I wear gloves for everything.”

It’s another aspect of her work that she’s happy to discuss with anyone who has concerns. She keeps beetles, which devour anything that’s on the remains. Maceration — soaking the bones in water — softens them and loosens any remaining flesh or fur. Sunlight plays a big role in sanitizing. (Boiling and bleaching are no-nos because they ruin the integrity of the bone.)

“By the time the bones are in the jewelry, they’re really processed,” said Kowalski.

Continuing creativity

When she isn’t working on her jewelry, Kowalski is a student in the occupational therapy assistant program at Pueblo Community College.

“Finding OT was a happy accident, but it fits,” she said. “It relates (to jewelry making). You have to use your imagination to solve patients’ problems, so it fits in perfectly.”

She’s eager to begin that career and to move to a larger house.

“I’ll have room for a real studio,” she said.

She brings her hand up to touch her newest necklace, which hangs around her neck. It’s an electroplated cat vertebrae. It represents her first attempt at that jewelry-making method and she can’t wait to create another — maybe one with a colorful stone around it.

“I still don’t have it all down. I’m still learning,” she said. “That’s why I’m excited about this.”

