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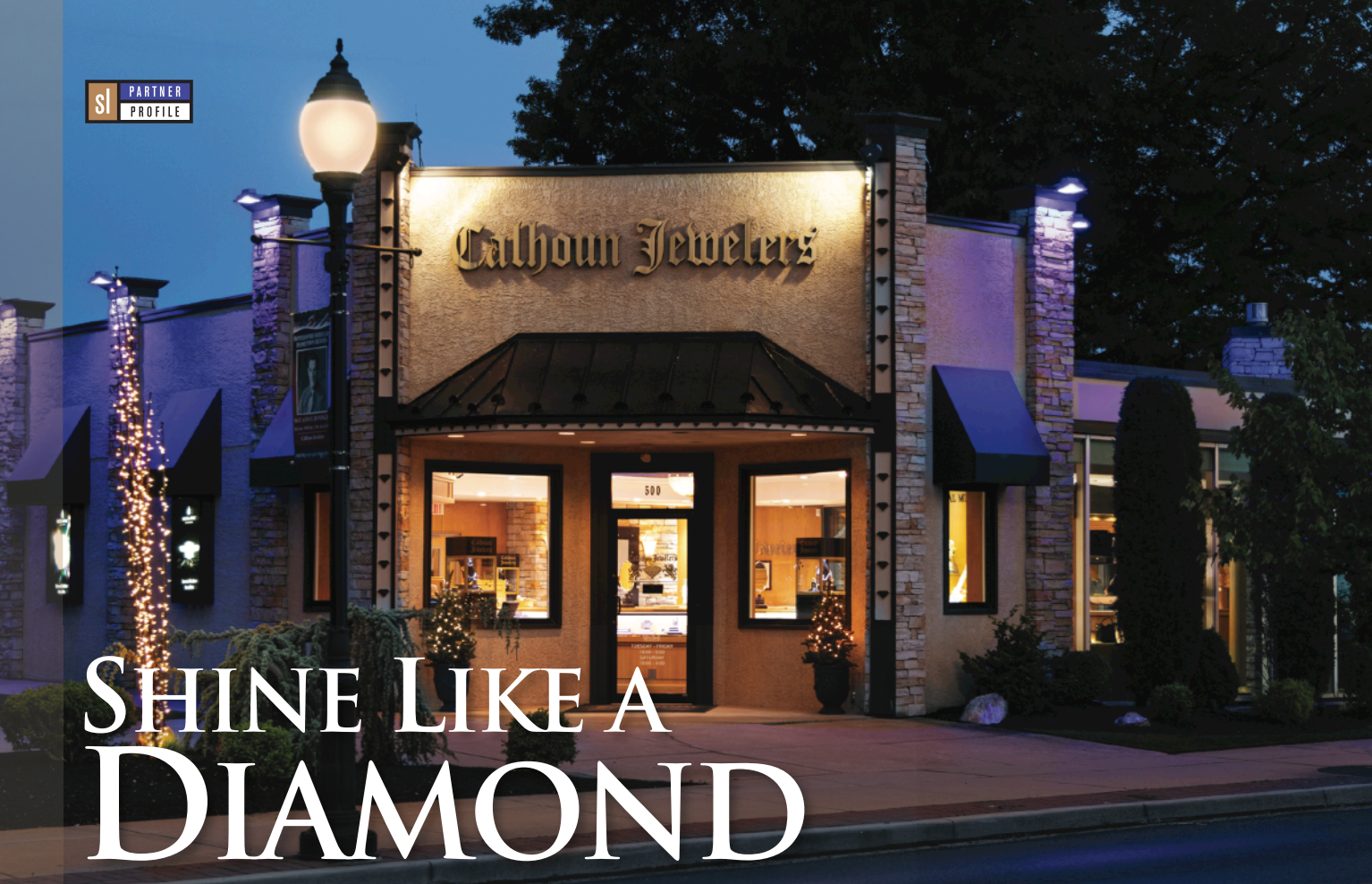
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Cathy Calhoun, the founder of **Calhoun Jewelers**, built her flourishing business on her ability to connect with others and her passion for jewelry of remarkable provenance.

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SHINE LIKE A DIAMOND

Cathy Calhoun, the founder of **CALHOUN JEWELERS**, built her flourishing business on her ability to connect with others and her passion for jewelry of remarkable provenance.

BY **BILL DONAHUE**

Much like the rare and precious items on display within her two jewelry stores, Cathy Calhoun is truly one of a kind.

Calhoun is the gregarious yet humble entrepreneur behind Calhoun Jewelers, based in Royersford, with a sister store in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. Since founding her first store nearly 30 years ago, she has become an industry expert known far and wide, and a force of nature driven by an unbridled passion for her craft.

"I love what I do," she says. "We do a lot of custom jewelry here [at the Royersford store], with a full shop of goldsmiths and designers. Different kinds of jewelry excite me, which is why half the store here is devoted to antique, period, and estate jewelry. I have procured a lot of unique pieces over the past five or six years, including a necklace that belonged to Elvis and a choker

that belonged to Raquel Welch. These are pieces of remarkable provenance, and you have to be very educated in order to buy and sell them."

While Calhoun studied business in college, she later graduated from the Gemological Institute of America (GIA). She also earned the designation of Certified Gemologist® Appraiser, meaning she has acquired the advanced knowledge, training, and experience needed to determine the value of diamonds, gemstones, and jewelry. To this day, she continues to "take every class I possibly can" through the American Gem Society and other organizations devoted to helping gemologists refine their expertise.

Some of her education has been more informal, but no less important. Calhoun enjoys the research side of the business, and she communicates regularly with her connections across the country and around the world, all of which help her stay abreast of new items coming into the market. In addition, she rarely turns down opportunities to visit destinations famous for their gemstones and other precious materials.

"I travel once a year to Botswana [in southern Africa], where I go and do mining," she says. "I have been a mile and a half underground to drill for platinum, which is an experience you don't forget."

All things considered, it's no surprise she was tapped to be a jewelry appraiser for the long-running PBS series *Antiques Roadshow*.

Calhoun lives a bicoastal life—one month at the Royersford store, the next at Carmel-by-the-Sea—and she says the back-and-forth travel "keeps things fresh and exciting." While each store is unique, they both share some commonalities.

"Both stores are welcoming and have staff who love what they do," she says. "We're not too heavy into name brands; I've always tried to brand myself and my stores. You're going to find things here you won't find anywhere else."

"No matter what someone is looking for, we do a lot of listening; there's no hard sell at all," she continues. "We let customers tell us what they want, and our job is to guide them. Each store has a bar, which is a small service, but it helps people relax. We also bake cookies all day long."

While Calhoun adores the artistic side of the business, she gets energized by the opportunity to meet new people. She gets as much satisfaction out of assisting a family in liquidating their jewelry as she does by helping someone purchase an engagement ring that best suits their style and budget. She also curates unforgettable experiences for a small group of women—top self-purchasers—she refers to as "The Carat Club."

"I don't tell them anything about where we're going; I just tell them what to bring," she says. "I've taken them to the Crater of Diamonds [State Park] in Arkansas, the copper mines in Bisbee, Arizona, near the

Calhoun Jewelers'
sister store in Carmel-
by-the-Sea, California



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Mexican border. And if you remember Maksim Chmerkovskiy from the early years of *Dancing with the Stars*, I took them to his studio in New York City for a night of dance lessons. One woman actually fainted when she saw him."

Calhoun's success is all the more impressive considering the fact that she "never thought about the jewelry business" until it was thrust upon her. She started her career working as a teller for the National Bank of Spring City. Her fortunes changed when the man she had been dating, a local jeweler named John Strasbaugh, fell ill.

"We were dating just a few months when he had a severe heart attack, right around Thanksgiving," she recalls. "When I went to the hospital to see him, he told me, 'You have to run my store until I get better.' So I took a leave of absence from the bank and told John, 'No problem.' I thought: *How hard could it be?*"

Her first Friday working at the store, she helped a customer choose between two engagement rings. Both rings were about the same size, but one was approximately \$1,000 more than the other. Calhoun figured Strasbaugh had made a pricing error, so she told the customer he could take either one for the lower price. Of course the customer chose the one with the higher price tag.

She then turned her attention to everything else in the store.

"I thought: *I'll straighten this problem out for [Strasbaugh] and make everything the same price,*" she recalls. "I knew nothing about color, clarity, carat—nothing. So that night, when I went back to the hospital and told him what I'd done, he nearly had a second heart attack."

The next week, she signed up for an educational event in Philadelphia hosted by the GIA. She hasn't looked back since.

"I fell in love with the jewelry business," she says. "I never did go back to the bank. John and I were business partners for 12 years before I decided to go out on my own."

Calhoun, who was born and raised in the Harrisburg-Hershey area, built a remarkable career despite a challenging start—or perhaps because of it. She was on her own even before she finished high school.



**You're going to
find things here
you won't find
anyplace else."**

—CATHY CALHOUN,
CALHOUN JEWELERS

At one point she was living out of a car.

"Things just happen to you sometimes, for better or worse, and you have to be willing to take chances," she says. "I have never been afraid to do that. Any opportunity that came to me, I took, mostly out of desperation. Looking back, although a lot of what I went through was not easy, I wouldn't change a thing." ■

A DISTINCTIVE HOME FOR A DISTINCTIVE PERSON

THE SPRING CITY BANK where Cathy Calhoun began her career has become a viral sensation. Not only is it historical in nature, dating back to 1872, but it has been remodeled into a home unlike any other. Its resident: Cathy Calhoun herself.

"My old boss at [the National Bank of Spring City] always knew I was on the lookout for another location to do a jewelry store, so he reached out to let me know the bank was closing it down," she says. "The building was old, so I thought it would never make it as a store. But I thought I might be able to turn it into a cool house."

And that's exactly what she did. Since purchasing the 5,200-square-foot building in 1990, she has remade it into a home filled with style, sophistication, and plenty of historic antiques. Relics of the bank's past remain, including two intact vaults; both have since been repurposed, one as a bar, the other as an entertainment center. It also has a few other surprises, including a sauna and maybe even a lingering spirit or two. Some guests have reported seeing unexplained shadows and apparitions, not that Calhoun believes in that kind of stuff: "If the place is haunted, it hasn't bothered me at all."

Calhoun's home has been highlighted on *The Tamron Hall Show*, HGTV's *You Live in What?*, and Netflix's *Amazing Interiors*. A CNN story about Calhoun and her distinctive home, titled "I Live in a Bank," has nearly 7 million YouTube views.

Calhoun intends to marry the two things she's best known for. She's in the process of creating a custom charm bracelet featuring charms inspired by historic items from her incomparable home.