

On working hard to find work/life balance



Goldsmith Maria Bray discusses the stifling effects of art school, letting your materials speak to you, and staying healthy and true to yourself as your small business grows.

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As told to Angelica Frey, 2537 words.

Tags: [Jewelry](#), [Business](#), [Process](#), [Promotion](#), [Success](#), [Mental health](#), [Time management](#).

We've been trying to do this for a while, but you got so many orders you could barely keep up.

I think I'm still catching up from my maternity leave—that ended three months ago. So I'm just catching up on back orders and trying to do that while getting new orders. And because my TikTok kind of went viral a little bit—which is awesome and great, but I've never experienced that before—it's this onslaught of new orders. It was a particular post where another artist actually just mentioned me in a comment and it really resonated with her followers. So they all came over and then another one of my videos went viral shortly after. It's only 1.5 million, so I'm not sure that's super viral, but it was the biggest I've ever had to date. That took my followers on TikTok from 349 or something super low to 60,000.

What is that like, for a business?

[It's a] whole new genre of clients, people who aren't really at the age of being a client. A lot of them are quite young, so they're not really my clients, to the point where they're at the place where they're going to purchase. The one ring that went viral was a [Belladonna En Trois](#), so I've gotten a lot of orders for that specific style, which I'm very proud of.

What does a typical day look like for you?

We wake up fairly early now with our little one, which is wonderful. And then it's feeding, getting her ready for another nap. My husband is currently staying at home with her while he's planning his brewery. I drive into work, which is about half an hour away or so. So that kind of gives me time to decompress, get my mind churning a bit more with designs and what we need to get done in the day, and also to just remind myself that all the emails on my phone, they're wonderful things, not to get overwhelmed by them before I even get to the computer to answer them. And then I get into the studio. I have my little Nespresso machine which I'm quite excited for and then I answer emails while having my coffee. And then it's to the bench for polishing.

I try to get out about eight rings a day. Some days I only get one ring done. Some days I don't get any. If I can get to the camera to take photos for social media, I try to do that before lunch. Then lunch is pumping and answering more emails and hopefully eating. Then I keep accumulating finished rings until Friday where I go off to the post office to get them on their way to their homes.

How did you stumble upon goldsmithing?

It was by chance. I've always leaned heavily into art for dealing with anxiety and depression ever since I was a little girl. I used to paint and draw a lot and writing became probably my largest pastime: when I was younger, I had very severe speech impediments to the point where they would cast me as like the silent part in elementary school plays. It was quite sad. I didn't like speaking. I wasn't outspoken or really reaching out to other people. So I was mostly wallowing and reading. I was really just devouring novels and books and writing on RPG [sites] online. So that art form has transitioned into the aspect of my jewelry making.

My then fiancé and I moved down to Kentucky in 2011, and that was the worst depression I've ever experienced: I was alone, I was away from family, I didn't know anyone there. I was looking for any things to bring myself back to myself. It had to be something bigger than what I've used before. I stumbled upon working with wire wrapping and gold-filled metal, making little chandelier earrings. I opened up an Etsy shop that same year not knowing at all what I was doing, and no one bought anything except for my mama for probably over a year: I was trying to find enough income from the things I was selling to go straight back into the next piece so I could continue working with gold fill and silver and then from there transitioned into wanting to learn more, so I did YouTube tutorials for simple soldering techniques on silver. I don't know if I even successfully soldered back then, but I had a tiny little butane torch and I was going at it. From there, we moved back to Michigan and I was enrolled in college, in art school. I've never really wanted to go to college, but, you know what other path is there that I wasn't really told when I was younger?

One thing I love about gen Z is how they are no longer obsessed with college degrees being the baseline for a fulfilling adult life. I'm a nerd so I always loved studying but I see how not everybody just wants to hang out with books all the time. Plus, the things you learn are not exactly translating into real-world job skills.

Yeah. And I love hanging out with books. I'd rather hang out with novels all day and sit in a class, but I have a problem with people telling me what to do—I guess is the easiest way to say it. My brain cannot comprehend instructions, like how-to reading instructions. It just does not learn that way. So sitting in classrooms, where I felt that honestly I could be learning more just by reading the novels I was reading was disheartening, so I quickly dropped out of college.

I have a problem with people telling me what to do especially when I have such a distinct vision and voice in my head of what I know I want to create. A professor or teacher or mentor would try to take that voice away from me by framing my work with their definition of art: it has to be edgy, it has to be something that's never been done. But I was wanting to maybe do something a little softer, more romantic and that didn't have spikes on it. It didn't have rawness to it. I want to make engagement rings. There's nothing wrong with being in love with love and I want to make things I want to make. There's nothing wrong with following what you truly love, especially in art, even if it is going back to what people would deem as soft or overly romantic. Maybe [artists obsessed with being edgy] just want to create something that hasn't been done before, but it's all been done before.

Eventually I became an apprentice under a master goldsmith when we moved down to Milwaukee: I just happened to come across their email. I emailed several jewelry stores and said, *Hey, here's my experience. I could come in and you don't have to pay me. Can you just teach me?* Two female Goldsmiths agreed, and they were absolutely wonderful

One thing I noticed by looking at your designs, both for the engagement rings and the earrings, is that the names and the concept evoke either the botanical world or a Celtic and Nordic mythological or fantastical realm. What inspires you when you're exploring an idea?

I'm inspired by anything that kind of has otherworldly forgotten aspects to it. I really want to take those and capture that energy from the stone and put it into the pieces. I want my clients to think it was an antique or is it from an elven realm that we've just forgotten.

A lot of times a stone will call out to me and sing to me. It doesn't matter if it's included, or not quite the best quality, but there's something magical about the stone. I tell the clients that the stone will sing to you; it will haunt your brain, and you won't be able to get out of your thoughts. Those are the stones that pique my interest to the point that I actually want to design with them. I usually don't have a finished product in mind.

I'm horrible at sketching, jewelry design, aspect ratios, proportions, all those things. I can't quite lay it out. But if I'm carving it in wax I'll just let the wax take me where the ring is supposed to go.

There was this collaboration between me, Choice Gems and Precision Faceter. She faceted this huge rough sapphire that was misty and slightly opaque but in a way that's reminiscent of fog rolling over the mountains. And so we had to do mountains on the side of the rim—we just had to. So that's definitely one instance where the stone, you just know what you have to make with it.

This industry can be really filled with greed. I truly do not want that coming into my pieces at all. I don't want it touching it. I believe gemstones hold on to energy. So for these are amulets of love and light, why would I want someone's greed to come into that along the route of the stone getting cut, mined?

How do you start a new project?

Honestly, I'll usually sit down at the bench with the block of wax and start carving to see where it takes me. Like I mentioned before, I'm not good at sketching, so I can't sketch out in the wax what I want it to be, because it will completely take a different angle, a different turn from what I had a vision of. I just let it go, just let it create, and then as it's coming to life and I'm seeing like, "Oh, that blob is a leaf. What does this remind me? Is this Elven, is it Dwarven? Are we looking at something that's from our world or some something somewhere else?," from there, I'll spiral out.

You mentioned earlier that you've just come back from maternity leave: how has motherhood impacted your work and your relationship to your work self?

Gosh, my work self and I are at war. There is no balance at the moment and it has been a struggle to get back. Looking back on it, I should have taken longer for my maternity leave, but there's that pressure in society to get back as quickly as possible. There wasn't pressure from my clients: they were phenomenal, so supportive and lovely. But there was a pressure that I put on myself to get back as quickly as possible and to just be where I was before I gave birth. But I am not there physically or mentally: I don't have the strength that it did before. So I am moving slower. And there are days where that just rots my brain with the fact that I can't go as quickly as I used to go. So we are currently not on the best of terms, my work self and I.

Psychologically how do you pull yourself out of this funk?

I used to use art to do it, but, you know, when you get to a certain point in a small business, I feel like I have lost the art of it a bit, which is something I want to get back to: I'm taking a hiatus soon to catch up on past orders and to hopefully get back to just creating again because I do feel that you reach a certain amount of orders and success and you're very thankful for that, but it comes at a price where you can't create and put your vision out into the world because you're so drained already.

I understand it: I am a writer and I noticed that when like I have a lot of clients who are demanding projects from me, I'm grateful because of course I'm getting like a steady income stream, but at the same time, I do not have time to devote my energy to my personal and maybe more long term projects. On that note, do you feel okay with yourself when you have to abandon a project?

It is hard. You want to be able to create something that you've envisioned in your head, but sometimes the material just won't do it, even if it's worked in the past. Maybe if you go back to the bench again, it might do it. But in that moment, when the wax keeps breaking or you hear that chip or the stone breaks, there's so much frustration and you just have to kind of let it go.

How do you deal with frustration in your day to day work?

I used to take it in stride, now it is becoming more of a frustration. I have to really sit down with myself and remind myself that I have so many emails because people are in love and they're excited, and that helps and it

centers me to not be like, "Oh, all these emails are just a nuisance." They're not: they're phenomenal, happy love stories, and that brings me back to where I used to be.

I am completely fine with admitting I am absolutely burnt out at the moment. And that's something that makes me quite sad, because I love what I do and I'm very fortunate to be doing it. But I need to get back to the point where I can be an artist again, instead of just a little mini factory.

So what would you tell someone who wants to pursue the art of gold-smithing?

Just to not be intimidated because it seems so glamorous and glitzy. It's not. It's just a bunch of little artists and hermits and setters trying to just make something out of these materials that our society deems as highly valuable. But in reality, we're just hacking away at something. Your hands get dirty, you bleed on a piece. Don't be afraid to just go in and ask can I be an apprentice? Can I come in and learn? Because that's how it should be with all other art forms. And not to be intimidated. The worst they can say is no. And a lot of times people won't say no because you have the drive to even ask.

And would you want to have an apprentice?

Absolutely. I would absolutely adore that. I think my next step though, would be to hire someone who is above my skill level to help me get to the point where I can be creating and have time to teach someone who is learning.

Maria Bray Recommends:

An overflowing goblet of malbec with a smutty Fae novel

Said Fae novel: A Court of Thorns and Roses, to begin

The feeling of being small amongst nature

Long car rides with Enya cooing in the background ("May It Be" is a favorite of hers)

Allowing oneself the time to just play in their craft.

Name

Maria Bray

Vocation

goldsmith

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